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One Word More on Browning

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By

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Browning

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TO E. L. B.

"And stepping there, with face
towards the sun,
Stopped seldom to pluck weeds
or ask their names."

PREFACE

The new style in biography wears its rosemary with a difference. It is not so much for remembrance as for startling thoughts, although it shows a most adroit combination of the two perennial sources of appeal—the familiar and the unexpected. As we greet the old familiar faces wreathed in unexpected expressions, we experience the reinforced satisfaction of recognition plus novelty.

Of biographers Robert Browning has had a plentiful share, though none of the latest fashion. Nor is the present volume designed to supply that lack. In reviewing a recent and up-to-date biography of Tennyson, the critic took occasion to remark how vastly that poet's modern appraisers have enjoyed "stripping off layers of Victorian eulogy." He then observed: "Browning has so far escaped the attentions of the candid friend, but if we may judge by the apparent inactivity of the Browning Societies, he too is passing under a shadow."

To this last acute discovery there are two obvious retorts to be made in passing. One is that the diminishing performances of these much-ridiculed Societies represent merely the natural waning of an enterprise that has served its original purpose. And anyway, if such reduction is a sign of an author's obscuration, how are we to test the loss of prestige on the part of those who never had any such honoring Societies? The other comment is that to be denuded of accumulated flattery is just the opposite from suffering an eclipse. One process exposes, the other conceals. But the interesting point is, as always, the wherefore. The reason for this neglect of Browning by the modish is doubtless his abnormal normality. Better had he been less limpid in life and more lucid in style. The good man makes a bad subject. A celebrity who supplies no shock for the blasé and no titilla-

tion for the bored is not worth his salt as dramatic material. The long and simple annals of the happy and well-behaved are bound to run thin in the modern biographer's hopper. And so, since Browning's life was too satisfying to make a satisfactory Life, his story probably will not be retold, at least for the present.

His stanzas also have been ground to a powder and used to thicken the sacks of a thousand floury (and too often flowery) critics. So busily indeed have the wheels gone round and so much chaff clogs the product that the purveyor of yet another measure may well be put on the defensive.

Browning again? No end to these Browningites and their Browningiana? What's the excuse this time?

No excuse whatever. Nothing but the meek reminder that Browning himself quoted *de gustibus* in defense of his own whims and interests, and the presumptuous hope that I may quote "the proof of the pudding" in return for making batter out of Browning's verse. The eating may prove not altogether tasteless for those who like this sort of thing.

As the table of contents indicates, my offering is in the form of essays on various aspects of the poet's product, each complete enough in itself to be taken alone if its theme alone enlists the reader's attention. The divisions necessary in any subject of such scope and complexity are here made along longitudinal lines, according to topics, instead of by the more customary crosswise partitioning into times and epochs. What seem to me the major issues and salient features of Browning's work are included, each summoned for its moment of special scrutiny and appraisement.

This isolation of items is of course temporary and artificial. The poet's use of satire, for instance, overlaps his treatment of emotion. His pessimistic vein has a left-handed connection with his recognition of tragedy. His dramatic instinct is a part of his artistry, and his ranking as artist versus philosopher has been a favorite text for the critics.

All this tracing of sequences and routing out of relationships may seem a dry academic diversion; but to the anthological sort of mind it is rich sport, even as any other hunting and collecting game. If in its course I seem to have burdened my findings with an undue weight of statistics and citations, I may say that many already have been discarded, and that those still left are retained by way of practicing the Golden Rule. When reading anything of an analytical or argumentative nature I myself like to be shown, and appreciate the illumination of instance and specification. And because so frequently I am teased by glittering but empty generalizations, and tantalized by the airy impressionism that scorns to substantiate its assertions, I choose the sin of commission rather than of omission. What is omitted cannot be summoned. What is committed can always be skipped. Not an unsuitable principle in its present application, at least. For if ever Robert Browning had to beg pardon, it never was for the things he had left undone.

And for justification of the whole pastime by motive, he again supplies the precedent, this time by making a confession about his own poetizing which may properly be applied to all our critical intrusions into his poetic domain.

So I said "To do little is bad, to do nothing is worse"—
And made verse.

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—F. T. R.

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ONE WORD MORE ON BROWNING

I

R. B., A POEM

An American critic, Gamaliel Bradford, in adopting a French method from Sainte-Beuve, has coined the useful term *psychography*. It is obviously a cross between *psychology* and *biography*, and means a brief, analytic characterization.

A perfectly veracious graph of any psyche is of course impossible. The best in this kind are but shadows, and the apparently frank and explicit Browning is no exception. Never was a man's outward life more of an open book through sheer lack of anything to conceal. In so far as interest depends on sensation and scandal, Browning's record is a deadly bore, dull, tame, insipid. He never broke a woman's heart, filched a man's purse, betrayed a friend's confidence, backed a lost cause, promoted a visionary scheme, nor made a picturesque figure of himself in any way.

But the candor of his deeds and his own exuberant exposure of his mind were in sharp contrast to the jealous secretiveness of his soul. That remained forever as "unproffered" as he vaunted it to be, partly from choice and partly from necessity.

In his first poem Browning described himself as a creature

> . . . . made up of an intensest life
> Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all.

In a letter to his only real confidante he added the "say all" amendment:

You *do* what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, *you*—I only make men and women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me, but I am going to try. I always shiver involuntarily when I look—no, glance—at this First Poem of mine to be.

As it happened, this First Poem never was, fortunately, since the poet's first earnest trial proved his clumsiness in personal confession.

Among his worst poems are the pair—"Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day"—with which he broke the four years of silence succeeding his marriage, and in which he tried following his wife's advice, and his own inclination, to "speak out." His temperament was too much for his desire. Even though what he really did was to speak through men and women more than he made them speak, the spiritual autobiography thus voiced comes in oblique and refracted rays and scattered fragments. In a later letter he declared, "What I have printed gives *no* knowledge of me—I have never even begun what I hope I was born to begin and end—R. B., a Poem." To the last this situation remained the *status quo*, the hope in it never fulfilled.

He did indeed write out what was in his mind, evidently said everything he ever thought of, with fewer consignments to the wastebasket than would have been advisable; but he pictured himself for all time as well as for the one occasion, when he wrote to his wife a few hours after the secret wedding: "When the heart is full it may run over, but the real fulness stays within."

Nevertheless, though we may not have access to that inner shrine which its possessor could not or would not reveal, there remains the all-but-that; and it may be deduced better perhaps from without than from within. The main impression conveyed by this degree of visibility eked out by some

clairvoyance is a luminous pattern of success shadowed by its own penalty.

When we tune in on the Browning biography we listen to a melodious theme consistently developed from a basic chord of good fortune happy in all its variations. It sounds as though Fate herself had grown weary at last of her own human failures and had decided to produce one triumph just for the novelty of it; as though in a moment of revulsion from the pathological condition of humanity in general and geniuses in particular she had resolved on displaying one sample of soundness and sanity, of physical, mental, and moral health.

"I shall now incarnate," we can fancy her musing, "Mozart's Jupiter Symphony — a C major, observe — into a human being. This calls for the best materials: richly varied ancestral stock; social and economic golden mean; wisely indulgent parents; cultured suburban home with stimulating city on one side and tranquilizing country on the other; individualized education—in private library, by tutors, through foreign travel; a single and supreme romance, utterly unspoiled either by preliminary trials and errors or by subsequent weakening or flattening; the congenial constructive life-work that is its own reward and more delightful than any play, though with ample margin for recreation; freedom from chafing responsibility, and command of time and energy; a wide circle of devoted friends; a reading public critical and appreciative at just the right times and in the right degrees to furnish the needed spurs for production.

"Thus shall a joyous youthhood merge into a vigorous, unpenalized maturity and culminate in a serene protected old age, unclouded by regrets and filled with purposeful activity to the very last. The final sound to come from this my human symphony shall be the words, 'How gratifying!' in response to the news of the publication of his last volume. This shall be an appropriate self-benediction to a life that

shall have had a maximum of gratification throughout its course. The last nail deftly driven in his house of life, the last stitch neatly taken in his robe of art, he shall have his 'bliss to die with,' having lived with it for a liberal span of years.

"His disposition shall be in accord with this flawless career. He shall be gregarious and winsome enough to be welcomed into a distinguished society, and reserved and sensible enough not to be sucked into its whirlpool. He shall be the cordial friend, the responsible citizen, the model son developing into model husband and father, the industrious scholar, and prolific poet. He shall unswervingly cherish his native bent, so promptly disclosed and undisputed by alien ambitions, yet never have to plead 'artistic temperament' in palliation of selfish demands on others or wanton neglect of duty or contemptuous flouting of civilized conventions. Whereby he shall earn the eulogy of not being 'at all like a damned literary man.'

"This high praise shall also prove that one can be impeccable without priggishness or prudery. This masterpiece of mine shall be mortalized into lovability by his booming voice, gesticulating arms, pounding fists, swift-striding legs, flashing eyes, his spasms of mirth and fits of wrath. His passion for reds and blues, for organs and brass bands, for flowers and animals, for dawns and Aprils, for the glory of motion and the verve of dare-deviltry, for everything alive and pulsating, rich and colorful, shall redeem him from any suspicion of drab and passive mediocrity."

And so it came to pass.

Now this jubilant harmony of happy life and sterling character having been presented to the world, what about it? Does the world congratulate the producer, the product, or itself? Not at all. The most it does is to admit the rare phenomenon to be a refreshing sight. One, however, to be contemplated with a detached, esthetic enjoyment, not

incorporated into another's experience as an inspiring ideal. For after all, such a spectacle but illustrates life's major paradox—that success is dogged by failure like a veritable shadow, deepening in direct ratio to the brightness that defines it. Unfortunately, there are certain natural laws that Fate herself cannot ignore or circumvent.

There is first the inhospitable law of mutual exclusiveness. Your strength may deprive you of delicacy, as, conversely, your refinement may cheat you of power. Vigorous seeds in a fertile, well-tilled soil produced the Browning crop of rampant tastes and sturdy sentiments. His garden was gorgeous with the red, red rose and his hothouse flaunted orchids, but small space in either was accorded to sweet heliotrope or shy anemone. It was not by accident that Browning cared little for pastel shades or minor strains. It is inevitable that, though his pages resound with music, you hearken in vain for the haunting cadence of the violin; that, though they are flooded with brilliance, you neither sit in the ghostly shadows of a flickering candle nor wander in moonlit enchantment nor are rapt into that magic glow that never was on sea or land.

Then there is the merciless law of compensation, that works both ways. To be favored beyond the common lot is to be removed from the common herd, and thereby to forfeit skill in striking the common chord that wins universal response. Since the greatest human craving is for sympathetic comprehension, the most constant human turning is toward those who can meet that need. But such understanding is manufactured out of experience in kind. It is the gift of those acquainted with grief as well as joy. Not that Browning was deficient in tenderness or tolerance, but they were not his specialties. If The Ladies of Sorrow did not pursue him far enough to unfold the capacities of his spirit, he must lose by that incompleteness even while he gains in being spared the troublous pain. The strong may rely on him for hearty

cheer, but for condolence the frail must look elsewhere. His pages are drenched with blood but not even moistened with tears. These are indeed too "idle" to engage his interest.

Finally there is the dispassionate law of justice in awards. This poetic genius may have been a work of art, but he could scarcely be styled self-made. Therefore his meed is admiration without applause. If the youth had no wild oats to sow he is hardly to be praised for not sowing them. If the man had no large drains on temper or patience he may be amiable and generous without claiming a medal for his virtues. If the poet received a legacy of ten talents, it is to his own pleasure and profit as well as ours that he refrained from hiding them in a napkin.

But in spite of all these laws and their minimizing operations, Browning's assets are in a safe excess over his liabilities. He invests not only life but death with vitality. And what after all is a more welcome gift to the living than a more abundant life? The brimming cup he offers may be florid and grotesque in design and its contents sometimes turgid with his "muddy metaphysical poetry." At other times its champagne runs clear and sparkling; it never harbors the brackish or vile; and it is solid ware, the same all through.

It is this genuineness that enables Browning to impart his contagious health to everything he touches. He can with no effect of moral perversion make crime seem wholesome, and the sensational sane. Without a hint of morbidness he can be preoccupied with the gruesome and make a hobby of death. From a man so tingling with life we can without a qualm accept a volume as redolent of mortality as a morgue or a cemetery. He is never in better form than when depicting the exit from earth of gay, triumphant young heroes and jocular, unrepentant old sinners. He deals with this departure indeed in every mood save the doleful.

And yet this habit of being merry through life and facetious in the face of death springs neither from boyish light-

heartedness nor a cosmic sense of humor. Browning might revel in his "jolly chapter of Rabelais," but one suspects that the wry smile of a Thomas Hardy or the mischievous malice of an Anatole France would find him unresponsive, possibly even a bit hostile.

Browning always relished ironic situations for their picturesque value and often used the stage device of dramatic irony, but he was too seriously respectful of the universe to adopt the irony of fate as a workable doctrine. And so he was obliged to let such as Chaucer, Byron, Ibsen, present humor as Howells defined it—"the cry of pain of a well-bred man." He was too reticent indeed to wail in public, though he was seldom required to wear gayety as a mask; but he did not see life as a comic farce. He could chuckle or roar at details in the foreground, but the long perspective sobered him up.

It was a sobriety, however, totally devoid of Utopian vision. It was quite natural that the youthful Browning should recover so promptly from his ardent adoration of Shelley. Aside from his personal disgust with the Shelleyan code of behavior, he soon realized his lack of sympathy for the humanitarian creed. His keen interest in all sorts and conditions of men did not feature or profess any love for humanity in the abstract.

At the same time he was one who

> Would bind himself in bands of friends to feel
> He lives indeed.

The whole force of a warm strong personality went into individual relationships and produced as high a success in friendship as in love. His life had its share of the separations caused by distance or death but was notably free from bitter alienations and undiversified by tempestuous quarrels. The incidents concerning Macready and Fitzgerald—in the early and late of Browning's life—may be taken as not only the

exceptions that prove the rule but as provoked hostilities for which others were at least partially responsible.

His poetry time and again celebrates the *camaraderie* that is not without its own romance. Festus, the wise and devoted Horatio to Paracelsus, cogently formulates friendship's philosophy:

> Still you must retain
> Someone to cast your glory on, to share
> Your rapture with. Were I elect like you,
> I would encircle me with love, and raise
> A rampart of my fellows; it should seem
> Impossible for me to fail, so watched
> By gentle friends who made my cause their own.

The relation of this excerpt to the whole poem is also the best symbol of Robert Browning. In such embedded gems of sentiment we find the man of feeling, a complete and satisfying success. In the entire production we find the man of attempted reasoning, not a failure indeed, but neither complete nor satisfying.

If, however, one were to select a single poem as the most perfect epitome of the poet, it would be not *Paracelsus* but *Saul*. Here also the zealous loyalty of one man for another is the concrete situation through which is worked out an ethical and metaphysical theme. And here also the dramatic embodiment holds a greater appeal than the speculative spirit it houses. The poem, body and soul, is the distilled essence of Browning, and both reveals and betrays him to the fullest extent.

Its successes are his best: its poignant situation, challenging motif, its sustained sweep through anxiety, compassion, eagerness for service, to the ecstasy of revelation and the glory of victory, and its gentle subsidence after unendurable exaltation into the peace that passes understanding. It shows his pragmatic wisdom, his perception of relative values, his hedonism in its most exquisite form, his delightful impa-

tience with asceticism, his shrewd detection of "inspiration" as the swift culmination of slow meditation and by no means an extemporaneous miracle.

Its failures are his worst: the final recourse to the magic carpet of romantic idealism for conveyance over the last impregnable fortress of brutal reality; and with all that, the unbroken passivity of the passenger thus transported from the dungeon of Giant Despair to the palace of Hope. There is no actual testimony from the rescued as to his reconciliation with life and his renewed resolution. Indeed the chief benefit of the enterprise seems to accrue to the rescuer himself. The very title of the poem is a typical careless lapse, for the hero as well as the speaker is not Saul but David. And this David, though ostensibly a historical character, is far from being a true reading of the original son of Jesse. By another characteristic quirk the author in embroidering an ancient theme ignores one member of the classic David-and-Jonathan alliance and substitutes his father, inventing an attitude for which there is little traditional sanction.

Still, though this poem tells more about the poet than does any other one, it naturally does not tell all. One of the few signs of Browning's own growth and advance over himself is found in a comparison between the advice given by David to Saul and the admonition of the Pope to Caponsacchi, the latter written after the writer himself had personally known bereavement. The youthful shepherd offers to the wearied king an inviting compound whose skilfully blended ingredients are nature's beauty, mankind's fellowship, divinity's benevolence, together with pride in accomplishment and chance of fame. The aged pastor has naught but a simple tonic of iron for his young discouraged priest:

> Work, be unhappy, but bear life, my son.

For in the meantime the poet had learned that "It is easier to advise 'bear up' than bear."

Yet the lesson was only half learned and remained to the end imperfectly assimilated. Browning spoke once of "the years that mature the mind," but the mind that prompted the *Epilogue* to *Asolando* was essentially as immature as the mind that fashioned *Pauline*. Like Chekov's "Excellent People," he liked to shout the slogan, "What would life be without strife? Forward!" But, like them, he strove little and advanced less. No man of his contentious generation was less militant than he. No poet ever indulged more in romancing about himself. His temper was pugnacious enough; but it takes two to make a battle, and Browning lacked the opponent. Perceiving little in the present acceptable arrangement of things that needed attack, he was obliged to mark time in his splendid military uniform and ask us to take the will for the deed.

It was this combination of dynamic disposition and static character that caused the poet to write himself out early and thereafter construct an elaborate fugue on each of a few favorite themes. That condition, plus the fact that his life was pretty well insulated from storms and cushioned against shocks, permitted him to talk big about "tasting the whole of it," and to welcome stings and rebuffs with the engaging air of one whose guests are uniformly courteous and considerate.

Withal Robert Browning has the right to be called human in the highest sense of the term. He had in him a minimum of both brute and angel. He dared do all things that become a man. He abstained from those that do not. Whatever may be said of his poetic artistry, he was an adept in the fine art of living. If he never did write his "R. B., a Poem," he at least is entitled to the same consolation he administered to his imaginary young poet who was unwisely ambitious to be transcendental instead of tuneful:

> You are a poem, though your poem's naught.

II

THE POET ON LOVE AND THE MAN IN LOVE

Robert Browning's love story, acknowledged as the acme of perfection, would seem to qualify him for giving expert testimony on this complex and vital theme. And so it has. "R. B., in Love and on Love" is a subject to command attention. Like all poets, he had his lyric vein, to which he added a huge dramatic stratum. His only discount as a witness came from this very perfection in his personal destiny.

Any Don Juan, with a wide variety of romantic experience, could doubtless speak with greater authority of the ins and outs, the ups and downs, of the spirit that guides both to heaven and to hell, but the variety itself rules out the permanence required for a true ideal. And unless you have tasted the best of a banquet, what are all your tastings worth? So after all, this Browning, with his happy personal incompleteness supplemented by a lively imagination, may prove well worth listening to when he talks of love, and he talks a great deal.

One outstanding feature of all this discourse is the sharp contrast between the actual estate of the man and the fictitious creations of the poet. Love may have become to him "a lighted torch by which he tracked out the meaning of the world," but that meaning seems to contradict rather than confirm his individual findings—a proof, he might remind us, of the divorce between his life and his art so emphatically proclaimed.

No objective poem of his celebrates the requited and sustained affection that exalted his own life, though there is a faint gleam of it in the Sardinian Charles and Polyxena. On the other hand, though love came to him but once and

came to stay, albeit late in arriving, Browning never is caught declaiming "true love can never die." He extols the "Now" when "ecstasy's utmost we clutch at the core," with no promise attached for hereafter. His versions of love thwarted, frustrated, perished, and of love fulfilled and enduring, are three to one. The despair of hopeless lover or embittered husband or grieving wife, the sadness of regret, the agony of remorse, the torment of jealousy, the venom of that most deadly of hates—a transmuted love frothing like sweet nectar poisoned—all these the poet depicts with a force and clarity unsurpassed in literature.

Meanwhile the unconscionable tenacity of the Browning romance, the preservation of the initial ardor that by every rule should have cooled with time, had become a public international scandal. Harriet Hosmer, a favorite American friend, wrote of Casa Guidi:

> By a kindly fate such storms and clouds as usually attend human life seemed arrested at its portal, while no household care or anxiety was ever suffered, by the most devoted husband the world has ever seen, to mar the sweet serenity of its days.

Browning's contemptuous loathing for the "horribleness of married friends, mutual esteemers, etc.," evidently warded off the common calamity of a stodgy, middle-aged stagnation. His early incredulous question, "Will this last?" was answered in the affirmative. And we know he would have declared after fifteen years of married life (his allotment) just what he did after fifteen months of courtship:

> I never, God knows, felt the joy of being with you as I felt it yesterday—the fruit of my happiness has grown under the blossom, lifting it and keeping it as a coronet—not one feeling is lost, and the new feelings are infinite.

The secret of Browning's conspicuous success in love as contrasted with his graphic pictures of its so frequent failure

is found of course to lie chiefly in character, a solution which he naturally leaves to our own inference. He simply happened to be a striking illustration of the fact that prosperity in love as in other things depends more on such mundane items as intelligence, enterprise, integrity, capacity for loyalty and devotion, than on the capricious smiles of Lady Fortune. Browning may have been too individualistic to be the perfect citizen (though he remedied this by marrying a zealous humanitarian), too conventional to be the perfect thinker, too verbose and moralistic to be the perfect artist; but he was not too anything to be the perfect lover.

This supremacy came about through a warm emotional nature directed by a conscious philosophy of love. Browning was aware of quite a few important truths in this realm. He realized, for instance, what might be called the three relativities of love: the relation between love and the rest of life, the relation between the sensuous and the spiritual aspects of love, and the relation between dependence and independence in the intimacy fostered by love.

"Love is best," avers the poet, but he nowhere says it is all. The *summum bonum* but not the *solum*. It should be pre-eminent but not monopolistic. To be sure, "Love is victory, the prize itself." To forego that victory and fail to secure that prize is the height of folly or the depth of misfortune. Nevertheless love is only temporarily an end in itself. Essentially it is the finest means to man's ultimate end—the development of character and the production of good works. The plea of Norbert to Constance,

> Set free my love and see what love can do
> Shown in my life—what work will spring from that!

is a replica of Robert's earlier appeal to Elizabeth.

This sense of proportion is reflected in letters and poems alike. They are duly concerned with love but not unduly so. Two-thirds of the poems are totally unromantic in theme

and the remaining minority are copiously diluted with other affairs. Half of his dramas are devoid of what is called heart interest; in only three is love the main theme, and in only one, the pure essence. Most striking of all is the ambiguous status of love in Browning's masterpiece. The angle of the Eternal Triangle presented in *The Ring and the Book* is the extremely rare one that love renounced may be better than love consummated, and that art may portray sacrifice accompanied by exalted suffering, as well as indulgence followed by anguished expiation.

Ardent and unrestrained as the Browning letters are, steeped in the emotional expression of two highly emotional and expressive poets, they bulk large with various extraneous matters—anecdote, gossip, character sketches, literary criticism, cosmic reflections, jesting and teasing—and it is for all these things that they are invaluable documents. Nearly six hundred of these missives were exchanged in less than two years by two people who lived only a few miles apart and most of the time were meeting at least twice a week. The opening phrase, the innocent little drop that started the whole deluge, was "I love"—though it was Miss Barrett's verses to which Mr. Browning then attached his affection. But thereafter, plenty of topics show a cross section of richly diversified lives. From neither man nor woman would Browning call love "a thing apart." Of neither man nor woman would he name it "the whole existence."

As to the sensuous and spiritual sides of love the forthright Browning is even more unequivocal than usual, for the subject is bound up with his vehement anti-asceticism. His recognition of the mutually reinforcing nature of the human body and spirit when normally co-ordinated would seem to be a matter of ordinary intelligence, too obvious for comment. And so it would be if the senses were content with their fair share. The trouble comes from their desire, usually accompanied by the power, to dominate. When this domi-

nation brings its inevitable disaster, the victim undergoes violent revulsion and rushes to the other extreme. But it is a negative extreme, not a positive, and is reached through the truly "pathetic" fallacy that mere suppression of the physical will of itself insure a healthy growth of the spiritual. Browning was so deeply convinced it would do nothing of the sort that he came down thumpingly hard on the irrational denial of either flesh or spirit. No one has had a keener sense than he that the most sordid thing about human nature is its willing acceptance of physical contact devoid of emotional justification. No one has asserted more frankly that the sensuous avenue is the only approach to complete union of souls.

Indeed, Browning's prejudice against inhibition might qualify him for a Freudian prophet, except that he probably would not have taken much stock in Freudian psychology. He was merely possessed of a robust passion which he put to the finest spiritual use. His own definition of love as "a passionate drawing closer" meant an all-inclusive closeness. And when, paraphrasing Voltaire, he declared that if marriage did not already exist he should infallibly invent it, his invention would signify a marriage of true minds or none at all. Accordingly he could testify in rather bacchanalian lyrics that rapture is its own reward and has its own exultant litany, and at the same time write to Elizabeth Barrett that he would prefer hearing from her to seeing anybody else, that just to see her now and then would be heaven enough if no more were allowed, and that his offered love was wholly independent of any return on her part.

And that is why his poetry captures and crystallizes the crest of the wave poised for its ineffable moment in fragile beauty, yearns over its swift subsidence, and also reveals the peace in the constant illimitable depths, of which the crests are but ephemeral though recurrent forms. This basic stability it is that provides for the knowledge and understanding

necessary to authentic love. Browning loved his Star because it had "opened its soul" to him, for he was aware that man can truly love only what he knows, just as he can truly know only what he loves.

Thus could Browning become equally adept in gratifying the senses, which live in the present, and in ministering to the spirit, which provides for the future. And thus he escaped the prevalent error of supposing success to consist in winning love, whereas keeping and deserving it are the real victories. "Power of endurance"—Nietzsche's criterion—Browning also would make the test between genuine love and the flimsy, spurious masquerader whose real name is infatuation.

Browning was alive to the many paradoxes of love: its proud humility, its longing to give and to receive, its impulse to rule and to serve, all converging in the nice problem of how to yield to the blessed comfort of dependence without sacrificing the prime virtue of independence. He would call the ideal human relationship neither the independence of the hermit nor the dependence of the parasite, but the interdependence of two strong personalities who know that it is necessary to be self-reliant but impossible to be self-sufficient. Out of such interdependence was wrought for the Brownings the two miracles, sure response and exquisite harmony.

This generous give and take pulsates with steady rhythm throughout the Browning correspondence. He confessed that the more he needed her the more he loved her, and rejoiced in the luxury of having "someone who is to like my verses or I shall not ever like them after." Far more than the cricket who substituted for one broken string on the lyre, she was "the real deep wonder of a creature" who enlarged the compass of his harp with "octaves and octaves of quite new golden strings."

Meanwhile he actually exults that her existence is a

precarious flame, because it requires his careful cherishing, "although ordinarily tapers burn best when left alone," and trembles with joy over the prospect of keeping the winds of heaven from blowing too roughly upon her. We may draw our own conclusions from the fact that the fifteen years of their married life garnered her greatest harvest of poetry and his scantiest. This Knight of the Nineteenth Century was a true cavalier in the Court of Love, with none of the insincere technique of the medieval code and none of the absurd inconsistency of slave-worship. In that respect Browning would have been the same kind of a "feminist" as Spenser, if confronted with the issue, and would have agreed that Chastity is best symbolized by a resolute Britomart in search of a husband. And he would doubtless remind Bernard Shaw that the important question is not whether man or woman is the pursued or pursuer, but whether the lure is a will-o'-the-wisp or the lighted window of home.

The real and sole cause for that ubiquitous malady, disillusionment, is the preceding pathology of illusion. The simplest preventive measure is not to be illusioned. Browning makes no contribution to the world's voluminous memoirs of disenchantment, for his experience reversed the usual order of procedure. His cynicism, such as it was, came early and from no other source than an incredulous attitude toward love in the abstract. He could not understand this thing, he said, nor believe in it, nor consequently be subject to it. Soon thereafter the resigned young skeptic was called upon to recant, and did it handsomely.

> Having for many years now [wrote R. B. to E. B. B.], made up my mind to the impossibility of loving any woman, having wondered at this in the beginning, having acquiesced in it at last, and accounted for it all to myself, and become, if anything, rather proud of it than sorry—I say, when real love, making itself at once recognized as such, *did* reveal itself to me at last, I *did* open my heart to it with a cry.

That kind of certainty is its own guaranty against disillusion. So assured, he was safe in continuing, in another letter:

> At first I thought only of being *happy* in you—in your happiness; now I most think of you in the dark hours that must come—I shall grow old with you, and die with you—as far as I can look into the night I see the light with me. And surely with that provision of comfort one should turn with fresh joy and renewed sense of security to the sunny middle of day.

And if fate did not grant that final anticipation, if Browning had to begin before fifty to live in the past, at least he had marvelous memories to live with. His first stricken cry, "I want her! I want her!" had for nearly thirty years to listen to its own echo in his empty heart, but there was no bitterness in his sorrow. He had had a full share of the warm affection which is the only solvent for innate human antagonisms, for hard reserves, for the instinct of concealment that imprisons the individual in his own shell until the magic release is brought by another. Such release once effected, a woeful aloneness may follow, but no real loneliness.

Out of the murk and slime of human life, this earth-spawn rooted in fear, propelled by vanity and greed, blasted by cruelty, have somehow sprung the two compensations whereby it may be redeemed, beauty and wisdom. It is because love is the wisest and most beautiful thing we know that we crave it and seek it and sacrifice all for it, even while out of our ignorance and weakness we debase it into folly and brutalize it into ugliness.

Browning saw love as beauty, and grew many a fragrant flower of sentiment free from the fungus of sentimentality. Here in an English garden strolls a lover happy in retrospect and anticipation, and voices love's eternal demand for a larger vocabulary:

Is there no method to tell her in Spanish
June's twice June since she breathed it with me?

There across water and land speeds a lover to the moonlit cottage where presently will be "two hearts beating each to each." Yonder along an Italian road, in "the quiet-colored end of evening" hastens a lover to the golden-haired girl waiting in the ruined tower, his gloomy meditations on life in general brightened by the radiance of its one grace and glory. "Love is best." A rejected suitor refuses to be disconsolate so long as the present moment offers its precarious bliss:

Sing, riding 's a joy! For me, I ride.

A forsaken husband grieves as he broods alone—

Me do you leave aghast
With the memories We amassed?

But consoles himself with the hope that frosty winter will hurry along and drive her back to their warm ingle-glow. A charming princess counts her throne well lost for true romance. A stately queen cries out her miraculous discovery,

There is no good of life but love—but love!

Browning saw love as wisdom, and concluded one of his letters with the proclamation of his creed:

But no more nonsense, because I am going to kiss you, which is wise, and love you with my whole heart and soul forever, dear, dear Ba, which is wiser, and pray you to love me, which is the wisest.

III

HIS FLAIR FOR FEELINGS

To the scientist, human emotion is a realm for study; to the artist, it is a field of operations: meanwhile each is somewhat hampered by an incomplete understanding of the other. The illustrations whereby psychologists illumine their deductions are marked by a certain lack of scope and distinctiveness. The pictures skilfully drawn by poets and novelists sometimes fail to convey their full meaning because that meaning was less clear in the painter's mind than was the dramatic value of the scene.

It is not to be supposed, of course, that a mutual encroachment on each other's territory would be profitable. There is one glory of science and another glory of art, and neither is to be enhanced by borrowing a halo from the other. But an excursion by each into the preserves of its neighbor merely for the sake of seeing a large object from a different point of view could not be otherwise than doubly advantageous.

It happens, fortunately, that a philosophically inclined poet has staked out his claim, and with an ample circumference, on the borderland of the two empires, so that he is easily accessible from either approach. Robert Browning has by no means a monopoly on the recording of emotion; but in range, variety, and complexity of the record, supplemented by a crystallized perception of its significance, he has no rival. Moreover, he has realized the psychologist's own problem. In his "Charles Avison," one of the *Parleyings*, he says:

> Now could we shoot
> Liquidity into a mould,—some way
> Arrest Soul's evanescent moods, ...

and adds,

> To match and mate
> Feeling with knowledge,—make as manifest,
> Soul's work as Mind's work, turbulence as rest,
> Hates, loves, joys, woes, hopes, fears, that rise and sink
> Ceaselessly, passion's transient flit and wink, ...
> . . . . to strike all this life dead,
> Run mercury into a mould like lead,
> And henceforth have the plain result to show—
> How we Feel, hard and fast as what we Know—
> This were the prize and is the puzzle!

But in spite of its baffling elusiveness, emotion is the element in human life and character that Browning most delighted to honor. Added to his natural instincts as an artist were those qualities of his own temperament that encouraged his zeal and sharpened his understanding in this matter—his fondness for the crests and crises of existence, for conflict and its decisive terminus; his zest in waking people up; his catholic taste in disposition and situation. It is because of these very things that he "writes with fury, but does not correct with phlegm," as one of his critics complains; that he "writes like a lion devouring an antelope," as another puts it; and that he made still another feel as if he "had been taking a bath among electric eels."

In order to give point and definiteness to this analysis of Browning's treatment of emotion, I have selected some typical examples to be considered from two angles: first, the "tensional" explanation of this experience; and, second, its ethical aspect.

To the psychologist an emotion is an alert, heightened, but evanescent state of consciousness, involving some clash between conflicting stimuli. The possession of "mingled emotions" is therefore not an occasional phenomenon but the inevitable thing. Envy would not be envy without its sting of shame. As soon as a joy ceases to be a fearful joy

it subsides into a mood of content. Desire takes its edge from anxiety. Grief is kept alive by the refusal to accept disappointment or bereavement as complete and final. Such acceptance induces sodden resignation or sullen despair, unless the sorrow is converted into cheerfulness through a new channel of hope or through the anodyne of activity.

Conflict, however, means the dominance of one constituent, even if the ascendency is only temporary. The drawn-battle stage cannot last long. An angry man, for instance, is a seething mêlée of scorn, rancor, disgust, jealousy. Presently one of these privates may assume command, and the angry man becomes a disgusted one; or the anger may be changed into remorse or triumph, as the case may be, through the physical outlet of striking a blow; or tranquilized into an amused contempt by the intellectual process of thinking it over.

The range of emotion is thus conditioned by consciousness, just as are the sensations of sound and sight. We count only a limited number of hues in the spectrum, not because the color-making apparatus is limited, but because we are. So if we can count only a few emotions, it is for a similar reason. Without pushing the metaphor too far, we may reckon as emotions those experiences which fall between the "infra-red" instincts, impressions, moods, and the "ultra-violet" convictions and sentiments. Sometimes consciousness is literally destroyed, as in cases of swooning from excessive joy or fright, by feeling pushed beyond endurance.

Since some sort of catalogue is necessary, I have chosen this middle register of the emotions as a basis for examination. My list, suggestive rather than exhaustive, includes the following: disgust, envy, fear, anger, grief, joy, pity, shame, and adoration. The number may be duplicated by recognizing the intensification of each one as a different emotion. Thus, disgust raised to the *n*th power becomes loathing; envy, a consuming jealousy; fear, horrified terror; anger,

fury; grief, anguish; joy, rapture; pity, a tender compassion; shame, humiliation; and adoration, a reverential worship. Four of our deepest and most universal feelings are omitted, being accounted as more permanent, stabilized sentiments. These are love, hate, pride, and hope. The real emotional opposite of shame is not pride, but a joyful exultation; and the direct contrast of fear is not hope, but a joyful relief. Curiosity, amazement, and amusement are intellectual reactions, tinged with emotion. No one of these has escaped Browning's observation and portrayal. But we must be content with a rapid survey of the nine emotions already mentioned, beginning with the least palatable—disgust.

The soliloquizing monk in *The Spanish Cloister* and the duke in *My Last Duchess* are commonly thought of as incarnations of hate and cruelty, and, indeed, they both confess to cherishing those amiable qualities. The pious votary says in so many words,

> If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
> God's blood, would not mine kill you!

But in his case this chronic attitude was heated to the temperature of disgust by the intrusion of the despised though unconscious offender into his mood of lazy, smug satisfaction. The very sight of his pet aversion, tedious old fool that he was, pottering about in his garden, was enough to raise the simmering spite of the onlooker to the boiling point, and cause his malicious, sarcastic envy, brewed by the ingrowing life of idleness and forced, monotonous companionship, to froth over in a seething, unsavory loathing, whose mumbled tirade would have scalded his "heart's abhorrence," had he been within reach. Withal, the necessity of dutiful response to the calls of religion adds the completing foil:

> 'St, there 's Vespers! *Plena gratiâ,*
> *Ave, Virgo!* Gr-r-r— you swine!

The aristocratic, self-contained Duke of Ferrara, addressing with polished vivacity his guest, the envoy sent to arrange the terms of marriage to the next duchess, would seem to have nothing in common with the vulgar, unrestrained monk. Yet his dominant emotion—disgust—is the same, and is given a different complexion by differences in source, constituents, and outcome. In him the consistent mood of scornful pride is keyed up into a reminiscent disgust by the situation, and that in turn is tempered by his artistic preoccupations and his consciousness of superior possessions in oils and bronze. He had once felt strongly enough to do what the monk wished vainly he might do, yet he did it with true patrician imperturbability. So now there is no effervescence in his emotion, partly because of its retrospective nature and partly because of a disposition that plumed itself on its haughty self-control. He is therefore able to diagnose accurately his feeling toward the late duchess:

> Merely to say . . . . Just this
> Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss
> Or there exceed the mark, ...
> E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
> Never to stoop.

It is the duke's fastidious contempt for carelessness, in contrast to the monk's careless contempt for fastidiousness, that allows his sneer to preserve its placid surface, and his vengeance to operate with a dispassionate inhuman effectiveness.

Four of Browning's characters are actuated by envy. They all seem as poised and passive as the duke, yet three are like him driven to murder, and the fourth is obsessed by it in his last hour on earth.

The dainty Parisian dancer who purchases poison with a kiss and chats with the chemist while he fills the order, is as good an example as Medea of the violence of injured pride. In this case the mood of hate was stimulated to an implacable

jealousy by the vision of faithless lover and rival at the king's ball, but since it was finding an outlet in decisive action, it could pretend to play. The little lady spices her rage with an interest in criminal chemistry and sweetens it with mocking laughter, though these really fan rather than smother the flame of her revenge.

The lover of Porphyria and the husband in *A Forgiveness* are also casual in deeds of horror, but the fatal decision was in both instances preceded by a period of conflict. Into the lover's mood of hopeless longing glides the sweet surprise of Porphyria's presence. Out of the struggle between the supreme bliss of the moment and the unendurable agony at the thought of its brevity comes the feeling of spiritual jealousy, as it were, and this leads to a way of capturing and keeping the fleeting perfection at which it seemed even God could not say a word.

The mood of the husband is a brooding suspicion that finally rankled itself into an overwhelming jealousy. When his destroyed faith had gathered enough force from repression and had conquered love and prudence, he became an Othello, a cool, esthetic, Browningesque sort of Othello.

The Bishop of St. Praxed is another connoisseur in art and as proud as Ferrara of his instructed taste, but his pride is pricked into anxiety by the approach of death. Apparently the non-committal attitude of his "nephews" toward his eager desire for a better tomb than old Gandolph's frets this anxiety, wavering between assurance and distrust, into a greedy envy that is soothed at the end into a gloating triumph —like the Duke's disgust none the less keen for being aroused by remembrance of the past.

Of all our emotions fear is perhaps the most poignant and the most delicately poised. Our instinct to pit hope against it is acknowledged by the poet in his

> Beat out thy last voluptuous beat
> Of hope and fear, my heart!

And again an immediate sequence is indicated in the exclamation,

> No fear! Or if a fear be born
> This minute, it dies out in scorn.

The effect of conflict is expressed by the Threatening Tyrant when he admits that "The small turns great if it vexes you." Thus was his mood of annoyance intensified to exasperation by being baffled and frustrated, and this in turn to fear—"So, *I* was afraid"—by a new and unexpected sort of opposition. His account, however, is almost too detached to be called an emotion. The three most conspicuous examples of real fear are Caliban, the wife of Dmitri, and Count Guido Franceschini.

Caliban, dabbling his feet in the cool slush of the cave and gazing out at sea and sky, indulging himself in theological speculations and a dare-devil intellectual analogy, is in a mood of complacent enjoyment. This is shattered and supplanted by fright through the bomb-shell of a sudden storm—to his superstitious soul a sure sign of divine wrath. In a confused welter of remorse, abject submission, trembling hope, and potential gratitude, the cowed slave grovels and mutters,

> Fool to gibe at Him!
> Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!
> 'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,
> Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month
> One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape!

Quite similar is the mixture in the stricken heart of Dmitri's wife as she recounts the tragedy she has just lived through and tries to explain how and why, in a literal sense, she did live through and come home alone. Her experience is the most woeful of all. A simple, innocent woman is subjected to the prospect of a terrific physical agony (named

by the shrewd and cynical Adversary in *Job* as the severest test possible to make), which may be averted or at least postponed by the sacrifice of her three children to the attacking wolves. As she relates how her growing dread was sharpened into an anguish of despair, she becomes incoherent with grief, horror, apologetic self-justification, and trust in absolution, finally swooning under the strain.

Frenzied incoherence also is the climax of Count Guido's career, as the second of his two long speeches ends in a cry of collapsing consciousness. Totally lacking in pity and shame, his controlling emotions up to the crisis had been envy, anger, and disgust, expressed in acts of deceit and a wanton, gratuitous cruelty. Brought to bay before the tribunal of justice, he simulates pride, hope, righteous indignation, as long as these have any chance of serving his ends. But, finally, confronted with immediate, inexorable, and absolute doom, when his last pitiful card of confident incredulity has been played, and trumped by the dread document from the Vatican, he is wholly possessed by terror. His last nervous outpouring is the scream of the trapped animal:

> Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,
> Is—save me notwithstanding! Life is all!
> I was just stark mad—let the madman live
> Pressed by as many chains as you please pile!
> Don't open! Hold me from them! I am yours,
> I am the Grandduke's—no, I am the Pope's!
> Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God, . . .
> Pompilia, will you let them murder me?

After this, even without the guillotine, the rest would be silence.

Of anger, *The Ring and the Book* also furnishes the most notable instance. After the first trial, Caponsacchi settles down at Civita in a mood of dreary resignation, which is fired into a passionate alarm and indignation by the tragic

news that summons him back to the witness stand. No longer on the defensive, he turns the tables and becomes accuser and judge, fusing his grief, tenderness, and infinite ruth for Pompilia, with his disgust at legal incompetence and failure, into a white heat of blasting, ironic scorn. The flame of his fury burns so brightly, sending out its little darts of bitter contempt, that it almost conceals the fuel it feeds on, fagots of compassion, despair, and adoration. It is only when the blaze dies down that we see their charred embers lying in the gray ashes:

> Sirs, I am quiet again. You see, we are
> So very pitiable, she and I,
> Who had conceivably been otherwise.

Of a similar quality out of a totally different source is the anger of Ixion whirling on his wheel. The struggle is between a prolonged physical torture that would welcome the relief of oblivion, and the mental torture that writhes under its sense of injustice and rejoices in its own vitality. He suffers, but triumphs over his suffering by hurling at Jove his defiant imprecations and by wresting an ultimate hope from his present agony:

> . . . . from the tears and sweat and blood of his torment,
> . . . . up let him look and rejoice!
> What is the influence, high o'er Hell, that turns to a rapture
> Pain—and despair's murk mist blends in a rainbow of hope?

Of a very different quality because lowered by personal spite and resentment is the anger of the unappreciated cavalier in *A Serenade at the Villa.* His fever of self-pity, brought on by the conflict between spurned love and baffled rage, produces a symptom that Ruskin would deplore as a pathetic fallacy:

> How the garden grudged me grass
> Where I stood—the iron gate
> Ground its teeth to let me pass.

Grief comes in various textures according as it is woven from loss, bereavement, disaster, frustration of plans, and according as these are personal and selfish concerns or altruistic and compassionate. For an active, lamenting grief Browning has little use, having nothing of the Jeremiah in either destiny or disposition. When he portrays regret it is usually in a satiric or a sermonizing vein. Even Andrea del Sarto, failure that he was, concluded that he regretted little and would change still less, an unashamed acknowledgment more approved than a weak apology.

The grief of Caponsacchi is swallowed up in anger, and Pompilia, in spite of her "great, grave, griefful air," fights her way through dismay, anguish, bewilderment, and despair, to hope and, finally, a gratitude—having the least to be grateful for—that absorbs all else.

The souls of Sebald and Ottima, the one swaying between remorse and a guilty acquiescence, the other superbly defiant but beginning to be alarmed over the waning of her power, are quickened to a belated shame and grief by the voice of Pippa, and these emotions are strong enough to effect a self-imposed retribution. The struggle of a base passion fighting its way to a high renunciation is signalized by the lover's cry that he is "proud to feel such torments."

Browning is not unique in preferring joy to grief. Most of us are biased in the same direction. But depicting an emotion is quite a different matter from entertaining it, and it is often the joy of the artist to portray grief. This artist has given sufficient evidence of his ability to understand and express the dust and ashes of life. Yet more perhaps than any other poet has he celebrated its ambrosia and roses. There are such lyrics of fulfilment as *Meeting at Night, Now, Prospice.* There is exultation in swift motion and the sense of accomplishment in *How They Brought the Good News* and *Pheidippides.* Even the dubious and dreary achievement of Childe Roland thrills through his horn in a blare of joyful

triumph. There is the passionate patriotic fervor of Luigi and the passionate religious fervor of David, both winning through anxiety and troubled doubt to a self-absorbing bliss. The passing of an emotion into a mood, as the stream into the sea, is fitly commemorated by Saul's young ministrant as he rides home next morning:

> And the stars of night beat with emotion, and tingled and shot
> Out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge; but I fainted not,
> For the hand still impelled me at once and supported, suppressed
> All the tumult, and quenched it with quiet, and holy behest,
> Till the rapture was shut in itself, and the earth sank to rest.

Two other examples of a conquering ecstasy are *In a Balcony* and *In a Gondola.* In the first, Norbert's joy triumphs over bewilderment and anger, and Constance's over astonishment and remorse. In the second, the stolen happiness of the lovers is doubly radiant against the sinister background of impending peril and later its actual arrival. All of these confirm by experience Caliban's discovery that joy and grief both "derive from weakness in some way." Omnipotence is beyond both, and by the same token, deprived of both. Human impotence is balanced precariously between them and is kept awake by the necessity of preserving the balance. The merry mood, which is the breezy tableland of delight, is a favorite with Browning, and often in evidence.

Pity is of little interest to the robust herald of success and action, who would much rather admire and congratulate than commiserate and condone. He sometimes enlists a pitiful sympathy on the part of the reader, as for the young lovers in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,* but for him pity is more akin to contempt than to love, and not permitted for anyone he really admires. He will not have us pity Pompilia, for instance, and therefore he makes her character victorious over her fate.

The subject is worth listing, however, for one instance, because in it Browning indicates his belief in its ethical importance. The Persian philosopher in *Ferishtah's Fancies* shows that pity is a justification of pain and a solution of the whole problem of evil. An example is cited wherein strong feelings of dislike, envy, resentment, are destroyed and then replaced by sorrow over the information that the enemy suffered from ulcer. The conclusion is thrown into the whimsical tone which mitigates much of the poet's didacticism.

> Therefore, Mihrab Shah,
> Tax me my bread and salt twice over, claim
> Laila my daughter for thy sport,—go on!
> Slay my son's self, maintain thy poetry
> Beats mine,—thou meritest a dozen deaths!
> But—ulcer in the stomach,—ah, poor soul,
> Try a fig plaster: may it ease thy pangs!

Shame is the opposite of pity in being the most inward of our emotions, as that is the most outward. We pity others; we are ashamed of ourselves. To pity ourselves is weak; to be ashamed of others is an unwarranted liberty, and indeed usually has a selfish source. What we are really ashamed of in others is the reflux of their disgrace upon us, and of ourselves in the last analysis for having sueh disgraceful connections. But the genuine personal humiliation that comes from a conviction of folly or failure is the most unendurable of all emotions, with the least compensation. Those who should be ashamed of themselves but are not are fair game for satire, and Browning does his duty in that direction with notable effectiveness.

Shame may be compounded with fear, as in the half-sincere fanatic Djabal; or with grief and remorse over the injury done to others, as in Martin Relph, Sebald, and Dmitri's wife; or with anger, as in the Queen who took young Norbert's declaration of love seriously, only to find it a strategic ruse. This regal dupe runs the whole gamut of

emotion and is as perfect an instance as any of tension and conflict. No fury of a woman scorned could exceed this of a woman so humiliated, though no scorn or any disrespect was intended.

The noblest and most disinterested of our emotions, adoration, an element in love, loyalty, and worship, is diffused through literature as through life; but it is too rare for frequent crystallization. Moreover, expression of it is hampered by its very power. For when Browning himself, the supremely articulate, says, "I cannot praise, I love so much!" he loves with the high humility that adores in silence. Yet his lyrics abound in homage to the beloved, and his narratives in examples of devotion to leaders and causes.

In *Strafford* we see Cavalier loyalty fighting a losing fight with disillusion, and adoration quenched in submission. The Algerian follower in *Through the Metidja* has his thrill of worshipful allegiance spiced with a sense of danger. The wounded lad in *Incident of the French Camp* who brings the message to Napoleon exults, adores, and dies as happy as all of Browning's dying youths. It is like Browning also, lover of animals, to embody a sacrificial adoration in a man's love for his horse. The Arabian in *Muléykeh* had saved his "pearl" from the shame of defeat but had thereby lost her forever. She might have been rescued from the thief but at the price of being "beaten in speed." He is bereft, desolate, wretched, exultant, proud, for he had parted with his one surpassing treasure rather than abate an inch of her glory. In *Count Gismond* adoration springs from gratitude, as it does in lighter vein in *The Last Ride Together*, and of deeper quality in *The Ring and the Book*.

These are some of the exhibits in Browning's wide picture-gallery. Since his genius was primarily dramatic, his portraits are characterized by individuality and objectivity. There are, however, a few sketches of himself by himself, extending from his first poem to his last, and constituting a testimony

to the emotional strain in his own character. At twenty the youth was ambitious to learn mankind,

> Mankind, its cares, hopes, fear, its woes, and joys;

and to attain to joy,

> But one in life, so it were wholly mine,
> One rapture all my soul could fill:

at seventy-seven the young old man waved a gay adieu to life, and made his final utterance, in the *Epilogue* to *Asolando,* a voicing of glad and spirited feeling.

In another early poem, *Sordello,* the very one that became a byword and jest for unintelligible obscurity, he announced as his poetic creed the simplest and most emotional possible:

> Would you have your songs endure?
> Build on the human heart!

It is in that same "incomprehensible" story that a character anticipates Fra Lippo Lippi in reading deep disclosures in surrounding faces—"this stands for hope, that—fear." And it is in another late poem, the *Epilogue* to *Pacchiarotto,* that the poet exclaimed with no diminishing of fervor,

> Mine be Man's thoughts, loves, hates!

Even *The Ring and the Book* has its dramatic monologue sequence enclosed in parentheses, as it were, (the first and last books), of personal revelation; and these reveal an emotional attitude toward the work itself, unparalleled in literary biography. The poet is avowedly, and incredibly, passionate over his miraculous discovery, *The Old Yellow Book,* the "ingot," and equally so over the "ring" he fashioned out of it. He displays to you with pride the repository of

> pure crude fact,
> Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
> And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since,

and adds impulsively,

> Give it me back! The thing 's restorative
> I' the touch and sight.

When he turns "its medicinable leaves,"

> A spirit laughs and leaps through every limb,
> And lights my eye, and lifts me by the hair.

But this emotion, as ever with Browning, was purely personal. His sensibilities were not diffused. It was said truly of him, "The voice of a great community wakened no lyric note in him, nor did his anger on its behalf break into dithyrambs." With all his fervent love of music, "the still sad music of humanity" never reached his ear or heart.

And it is undoubtedly this dramatic preoccupation that saved Browning, as it saved Dickens, from becoming submerged in the slough of dogmatism. For though he is the artist in portrayal, he is also the philosopher in interpretation.

It may be at first sight a disappointment to find the poet agreeing with the scientist as to the fleeting and distracted nature of our emotions. But this common premise is followed by a much more important conclusion, in which they also agree, that these same feelings, in all their strife and instability, are the stuff from which character is fashioned. Emotion is the raw material of character, and no matter how raw it may be, it is still material—the thing without which no product of any kind is possible. Our emotions may be as unstable as water, but they are as necessary as water to life and as transmutable into more permanent forms.

"The Moral Hygiene of Emotion," says Professor Dewey, "is to utilize emotional disturbances for the intensification of the intellectual life." "Suffering enters Browning's poetry," says Herford, "almost never as the artless wail of the helpless striken thing. . . . . It began to interest him when the wail passed into the fierceness of vindictive passion, or the outward calm of a self-subjugated spirit, or into speculative if bitter retrospect."

The sin of Duke Ferdinand and the Lady Riccardi was that they allowed their emotion to stagnate, and consequently found their judgment day upon them unaware. The folly of Kate Brown and the sculptor Smith was that they rusted alive in a repression that gave neither romantic happiness nor artistic success. Far better for these and others "to be dead of joy, James Lee," than to lose both the joy and the potential value of the sorrow. The release of emotion into the sudden discovery of truth we call inspiration is portrayed directly through David in *Saul,* and indirectly in *The Last Ride Together, Abt Vogler,* and Caponsacchi's experience in *The Ring and the Book.* In these and other poems Browning exemplifies the advice of Lord Bacon that any painful destiny be "not a dull and neglected suffering, but a wise and industrious."

To Browning no emotion, not even love, is an end in itself but the means to the higher end of fine, constructive living. Accordingly he has illustrated many times what Dewey calls "the fallacy of Stoicism." It is not the cold, unemotional nature that is the best type, but that of the strongest emotions kept under the firmest control.

By one poet then at least we are assured that any instinctive resentment we might feel at the pronouncement of the psychologists on the ephemeral and discordant nature of our emotions will be more than mollified by the knowledge of their ultimate ideal career. In the sentiments, convictions, and intelligent behavior into which they may be transformed we may find the harmony and permanence essential to our sense of the dignity and significance of human life.

IV

HIS PUNGENCY AND WIT

One of Robert Browning's biographers describes him symbolically as going into polite society in his shirtsleeves and making faces at it. A more discriminating college student offers the amendment that the critic should have left the coat on, as there never was a puerile contempt for convention in this least Bohemian of poets. It is true that he does "make faces," but usually at the satirist's official game, the pompous pretender; nor is polite society as such often pursued by his hooting. Like his own poet of Valladolid, he strolls along the street; now he winks at some sly rogue, then he gives a complacent sentimentalist a disconcerting nudge, anon he sticks out his tongue at a highly respectable institution, presently he rather boisterously trips up a ranting radical with one foot, and while the applause of the bystanders still echoes he undermines neatly with the other a scandalized reactionary.

It is all by the way. This citizen of the world has much bigger business and far higher desires than making fun of his fellow-creatures. But if they will be so amusing, how can he help a casual gesture or a parenthetical remark? Passing through the cloisters of a cathedral or the courts of law, he may smell a rat, but he is no rat-catcher. He merely sniffs, grins, and goes on. On a few occasions indeed he has lingered to expose and even execrate, but it was because the situation was fraught with other issues; his disgust was accordingly bound up with other emotions and could not be segregated and proportioned. There might even be as many rats as were evoked by the Pied Piper, but Browning never would lure

his victims into a Weser and leave them with the cruel unconcern of the pest-destroyer. He merely makes them dance to his merry tune with the sardonic notes, and thereupon, the exhibition concluded, leaves them to continue their capers, or dry-rot at ease till the Judgment Day.

To speak by the book, nearly half of Browning's voluminous product is entirely serious, ranging through pathos to tragedy. Of the other, slightly larger, section, almost half is composed of the mainly serious with a more or less pronounced satiric flavor. The remainder is divided about evenly between poems of unsatiric humor and those that might be styled satires, though at that the term must be used in a liberal sense to include even this very moderate proportion.

This restriction in quantity is matched by a discount in quality. Some of the poet's best output is indeed found in every group, but the smallest proportion of the best is in the most highly satiric zone. The chronological distribution is likewise evenly and widely made. No group of poems, from *Dramatic Lyrics* to *Asolando*, lacks its satiric seasoning; but on the whole it appears in increasing amount and decreasing virtue. The deftest satires all come early. Toward the last the effect is of salt that has lost much of its savor and is of coarser grain, thrown in with too liberal and careless a hand.

Students of satire have been primarily interested in its objects, together with its motivation so far as that could be detected, and its effects so far as they could be discerned. But the field of interest is now shifting, with the growing realization that the targets remain pretty much the same from age to age, that the avowed purposes are often open to suspicion, and that the results are hardly worth harvesting. In spite of prolonged and energetic activity on the satiric firing line, the mortality has not been encouragingly high. The familiar old follies of our faulty human nature continue to crop up as obtrusive and unabashed as ever.

This deflating fact does not, however, at all diminish the worth of satire as a scope for observation, for there still remain the important by-products of its unremitted industry. These are subjective rather than objective. It is the reflex light thrown on the satirist, the disclosure of his aims and methods as indicative of his own temper and point of view, that rewards the investigator in the laboratory of souls. Man reveals himself willy-nilly in all his actions and attitudes, but nowhere and in no wise more illuminatingly than in the two qualities that go to the making of satire, his humor and his criticism. By what he censures and what he ridicules may his spiritual horoscope be cast, and the more readily when these two operations are combined into one, as is the case with the satirist.

Since also another conviction has dawned, that no art can live by satire alone, the categoric noun has gone somewhat out of style, yielding place to the more modest descriptive adjective. As a serious writer with a satiric vein, incidental yet pervasive, Browning is an apt modern instance of the theory of subordination; and as a dramatist and narrator, portraying mankind in its habit as it lives, and letting the portraits bespeak their own titles, he illustrates the approved realistic, indirect practice. These satiric portraits, both of fictitious and historical characters, form a delectable Rogues' Gallery. There is nothing original in the list of traits Browning most delights to dishonor, but considerable revelation in the alignment of his collection.

As to the one legitimate object of all satire, deception, there too the poet is in line with our present preference. While he has scarcely a corner for the clever deceiver of others, the Tartufian or Pecksniffian type of hypocrite, the largest room in his gallery is devoted to the self-deception, unaware, of the stupid and gullible, the artless and inane, the shallow and superstitious. And here the striking discovery is that the main exhibit of this "dearth of the intel-

lectuals" is found not in individuals but in groups. Browning was a true Briton in his contempt for the crowd, ignorant, fanatic, but self-satisfied. He has made a wall-full of these little charcoal sketches. In most of them, according to his favorite dramatic method, the mob is delineated by some superior soul standing apart.

Paracelsus is doomed "to lecture to thick-skulled youths," who presume to pass high judgment on his pioneer philosophy. Sordello girds at the public "satisfied with shams" and at "the herd's stupid sterling happiness." The courtier Guilbert jests at himself for being "the people's friend." The citizen of Spain shows up the silly populace romancing about the private life of a townsman who must have been wicked because he was solitary. Karshish comments curtly on the superstitious Jewish mob that crucified a prophet for failing to work miracles to order. Fra Lippo Lippi smiles at the simple monks who "praised loud" the verity in his drawings until checked and taught by their betters "what to see and not to see." Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau mocks at the million fools that ape one wise man. "Half-Rome" refers with scorn to the gaping multitude, prying with confident curiosity into the church that guarded the murdered bodies; "Other Half-Rome" has the same contempt for the morbid, vulgar crowd pushing into Pompilia's hospital and desecrating a deathbed; and "Tertium Quid" feels ineffable ennui toward the "rabble's brabble of dolts and fools." The disciple of Pietro of Abano descants on "human geese" and begs his master to teach his art of "making fools subserve the man of mind." Jochanan Hakkadosh rates the "many's mindless mass" as mules and cattle. And to the Pope who had used his net successfully for campaign purposes and hung it up after it had "caught the fish," his electorate was a still lower order of creation. From Aristophanes, gibing at the Athenian audience which "prodigiously talks nonsense," to Mr. Sludge, confessing

the artlessness of his Anglo-Saxon spectators, the line is unbroken.

Occasionally Browning breaks through his stage screen and testifies on this theme in his own person, touching off with a backhanded stroke the jabbering street-fillers of Faenza, the smugly fanatic congregation in Zion Chapel, the haranguing Order of Freed Ones in *Pacchiarotto*, or giving suave advice to George Bubb Dodington on how to fool all of the people all of the time.

All this repudiation of the commonalty comes less from the poet's aristocratic creed than from his native individualism, his delight in sharp distinctiveness of any kind, his corresponding disgust with the average, the aggregate, the commonplace and drab. Yet he never asserts his exclusiveness. Not a Nietzschean syllable escapes him. His aloofness from the rising tide of social sympathy in which his contemporary Victorians were sometimes nearly swamped was not a rationally conducted policy but a temperamental reaction. He himself would doubtless view with some astonishment his own crop of patrician plants and snobbish weeds. He simply sees and satirizes know-it-all stupidity as a trait of the mob, and records it as a ludicrous phenomenon of humanity gregarious. Like poverty—and a concomitant of it—we shall undoubtedly always have it with us, but why worry? There will always also be the rich and cultured, the strong and unusual, the angelic and the fiendish, to be interested in and to write about.

As for the individual goose, let us enjoy a little fun at his expense. We can chuckle at the Bishop's vivacious account of the "heavy scholar" he has cloistered up, writing the book "to let Fénelon know the fool he is" which the great ecclesiastic has "promised Christendom next spring"; the drudge being firmly warned not to "covet diversion beyond catching his own fleas." We can twinkle at the visit of "our lump of learning, Brother Clout, and Father Slouch,

our piece of piety," dutifully paid by "the two moony dolts" to the Cardinal, thereby furnishing that sophisticated dignitary with immense amusement. We can be merry over the naïve bombast of Dominus Hyacinth, pluming himself upon his "miracle of defense," which was really a miracle of evasion and vacuity. This last portrait especially is painted with such artistic care and joyous relish that one suspects Browning of fellowship with Lamb in loving a fool.

A more individual trait than stupidity, though really rooted in it, is vanity. And since its most telling exposure takes the form of unconscious self-betrayal, the dramatic monologue is a peculiarly effective device. In this group are some of the artist's most successful achievements.

The Italian Person of Quality is much troubled over the painful necessity of living in a boresome villa when "life in the city square" offers a perfect wealth of gaudy sights and blatant sounds, but not at all troubled over the state of his own taste. It could not even dawn on him that this urban life might hold attractions superior to a public fountain topped by a nude statue, a postoffice center of scandal and buffoonery, and gay religious processions wherein Our Lady is

> borne smiling and smart
> With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven swords stuck in her heart!

The railing, muttering monk in the Spanish cloister is steeped in self-approval. The Bishop of St. Praxed's flatters himself with his last pagan breath on his eminence in art and letters and his triumphs in competitive philandering. The Abate Paolo after his villainous interview with Violante rises up and goes forth grandly, "as if the Pope came next."

But it is on that brand of vanity that inflates itself into criticism that Browning is particularly severe. The "ancient master" in art is "a lion who dies of an ass's kick." And the poet's own personal impatience with critic and reformer is

vented with some asperity time and again. Most personal of all and most bitter is the *Epilogue* to *Pacchiarotto*, the poem itself a slashing attack on the smug social renovator.

For all this antipathy to the critical habit and policy, two reasons are adduced or implied: the flabby substitute of talk for action, and the old mote-and-beam inconsistency. Browning's impetuous temper was prone to exalt getting the thing done, and also to toss aside with the same fine Rooseveltian disdain the chance of there really being something to howl at. Likewise his jealous individuality would brook no trespassing on any ground, and the less if the trespassing physician showed no ability nor inclination to heal himself. In many a caustic application the poet indicates with sufficient force his lack of enthusiasm for prying, meddling, and altruistic interference generally. The logical converse of this vice is the virtue of minding one's own business. Those who fail in this, not only through preoccupation with other people's affairs but through laziness, indecision, drifting, are rounded up and branded in a motley collection.

Out of the same impulse that cherishes all life and blazes with wrath at any molestation or hurt of the innocent and joyous arises the antagonism toward any rejecting of life itself, especially the cynicism that sniffs at existence and the asceticism that barters the actual present for a fancied future. With some of his sharpest strokes Browning lets in a devastating light on the renouncers and ingrowers of this world.

Such are the satirist's findings on the seamy side of individual human nature. Of it in professional aggregation he has less to say. Against medicine and the school he evidently has no grudge at all. It is interesting to note that, although he takes a fling at German students for stupidity and Italian for cruelty, he has no arrow in his quiver for education, that shining mark long loved in English satiric archery; an omission doubtless due to the unacademic nature of his own rearing and his innocence of pedagogues and curricula.

Clerical satire is more in evidence; not found most incriminatingly in the candid portraits of worldly clerics, for Browning makes this worldliness rather attractive, but in his observations in *The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* and *The Ring and the Book.* The indictments are the same, so familiar in the individual—hypocrisy, fanaticism, and inconsistency—developed in the group. It is characteristic of this hater of cruelty as an active vice and sluggishness as a passive one that he should be doubly impatient with the Inquisition. In *The Ring and the Book* he fulminates against the organized duplicity that permitted torture under the plea, first, of preserving a sacred institution pure and undefiled, and, second, of an unintentional lapse of vigilance. It is public opinion that forces the Church into line with civilization:

> Religion used to tell Humanity
> She gave him warrant or denied him course.
> And since the course was much to his own mind,
> Of pinching flesh and pulling bone from bone
> To unhusk truth a-hiding in its hulls,
> Nor whisper of a warning stopped the way,
> He, in their joint behalf, the burly slave,
> Bestirred him, mauled and maimed all recusants,
> While, prime in place, Religion overlooked;
> And so had done till doomsday, never a sign
> Nor sound of interference from her mouth,
> But that at last the burly slave wiped brow,
> Let eye give notice as if soul were there,
> Muttered " 'T is a vile trick, foolish more than vile,
> Should have been counted sin; I make it so!"
> Then did Religion start up, stare amain,
> Look around for help and see none, smile and say
> "What, broken is the rack? Well done of thee!
> Did I forget to abrogate its use?
> Be the mistake in common with us both!"

It is in his great epic also that Browning masses his attack upon the Law, sarcastically described as

> The recognized machine,
> Elaborate display of pipe and wheel
> Framed to unchoke, pump up and pour apace
> Truth till a flowery foam shall wash the world,
> The patent truth-extracting process.

The Church had at least Caponsacchi and the Pope. Bench and Bar could muster only the brace of lawyers, one of whom was a fool and the other a knave, and the trio of judges whose unconscionable muddle of justice precipitated a terrible and gratuitous calamity. It is the priest indeed, adjudged by them as culprit, who later was transformed into a Daniel come to judgment, and shriveled them with his ironic recrimination for the "jocular piece of punishment." What they get their flaying for is the purblind cynicism that could not conceive of a white motive for a dubious-hued deed. Precisely the same is the low estate of the Juris Doctor Bottini, and that is undoubtedly the cause of Browning's Juvenalian depicting of him, while his treatment of Arcangeli is Horatian. The one is a noxious compound of misanthropic craft, vile-minded trickery, and flippant emptiness; the other, in spite of his vulgar cunning, pompous vanity, slovenly sprawling, shallow pseudo-sentiment, is somehow not unlovable. The pair are united only in the unholy bonds of mercenary motives and bombastic methods.

If poetizing can be called a profession, it is here that homage should be paid to Browning's self-reflexive humor that does not permit his own ilk to go scot free. The main trouble with Sordello was that he was a poet. Cleon, Norbert, the speaker in *The Last Ride Together*, and others contribute to their author's favorite dictum of the intrinsic worth of immediate experience. The case against the poet is that he talks too much and acts too little, flattering himself meanwhile that his loquacity is precious.

In addition to his own contributions, this poet is at some pains to supply, in the shape of an "Apology" from the first satiric playwright on record, an interpretation of the motive and method of satire itself. According to Aristophanes, the rebuke humorous is benevolently medicinal, and subtle irony the spice that makes palatable the trite, inane, and obvious.

But for all his eloquent exegesis, quite in the conventional vein, to which his Greek original might or might not subscribe, Browning's own practice followed his theory very much as the Constitution sometimes follows the Flag, or as a certain lagging disciple followed his Lord. Not as a crusading enterprise, not for any propaganda, not from an outraged sense of a mismanaged world, not in a spirit of enthusiasm for the public weal, did his satire come, at least to any great extent, but mainly because of his native endowments, to wit: a quick and knowing eye and a saucy tongue, a mind critical in spots, a lively imagination, and a temper at once exuberant and irascible. By reason of these qualities he has not only mixed the blend of humor and criticism that is satire but has brewed copious drafts of each ingredient—jovial humor and serious criticism.

In one so ebullient it is entirely natural to find evidences of a not impeccable taste and a not infallible judgment. His fondness for animals, for instance, led him into ill-considered bursts of sarcasm against vivisection, his ridicule of torture and exploitation sometimes became gruesome, and in making criticism absurd he plunged himself into the absurdity of a juvenile attitude toward the critic's important function in art and affairs.

Of injustice in his satire the most flagrant case is his manhandling of the law. For his derision of legal pretentiousness and inefficiency there is no doubt plenty of justification; but for his version of the Franceschini prosecution and defense there is no real warrant in the source document, *The Old Yellow Book.* His two attorneys are good vaudeville exhibi-

tions of fatuous stupidity and unprincipled cunning, but they are not the lawyers in the original case. They are a florid vision of the poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling.

Thus does the satiric strain in Browning—casual yet permeating, vivid if sometimes freakish, often incisive and usually skilful—serve to point the moral that satire itself is less moral by nature than by popular reputation, but that it is not thereby shorn of all justification. "Then, satire,—oh a plain necessity!" exclaims Browning's Aristophanes. To be sure. Not only by reason of the provocation,

> As when shall want its flaw mere human stuff?

but by reason as well of the instinctive behavior of the artistic temperament in the presence of this provocative stimulus. So long as our mortal race enjoys its prerogative to make game of its own frail mortality, it will indulge in a steady assault against its own flimsy but resilient barricades. Failing of other accomplishment, it can at least continue to delight in its own artistic effect and supply itself with vast entertainment.

To this achievement Robert Browning has contributed a liberal share. Whatever else may be said of him, he cannot be called vapid or flat. He may inflict boredom by his verbosity, but at least he offers the antidote of pungency. Pungency may not cover a multitude of sins, but it has the equally valuable capacity of charging both sins and graces with a voltage of heightened interest.

V

HIS SAVING GRACE OF PESSIMISM

It occurred to Chesterton that he could perpetrate another paradox through his perception that Bret Harte was a humorist, an American, yet not an American humorist. But he failed to recognize still another opportunity in spite of its staring him in the face as he composed his brisk biography of Browning. Perhaps he considered it enough to discover the optimism of Byron, and so left at large the equally important pessimism of Browning. For although Browning was certainly robust and ostensibly optimistic, he was not the robust optimist that popular report declared him to be.

Optimism, it seems, is always robust, just as materialism is always crass. And it was, to be sure, on the swelling tide of this robust optimism that the poet finally sailed into the south of public opinion.

The tide itself was augmented by the double service of that willing epithet, Robust. It naturally propelled the quality, Optimism; it chanced to be attached to this man Browning. Presto, the robust Browning becomes a robust optimist. The manipulated adjective is indeed not wholly superfluous. There is a flabby optimism and a robust pessimism and, for that matter, a flabby pessimism. But the point of interest here is the strange case of his own "Time's Revenges" that beset the poet on this issue.

For it happened that the very merit for which he was crowned by his contemporaries became thereafter less a badge of honor than an inglorious brand. But in the meantime he is found to be less deserving of it, whether badge or brand, than had been supposed. Wherefore he is by way of saving his reputation through what would formerly have lost it.

It was one exception to his otherwise fortunate fate that placed a poet all compact of hard sense and soft sentiment in a generation that encouraged the latter more than the former. For this generation mistook a glittering surface for a vasty deep, stimulated by approval the expansion of that surface, and wisely refrained from probing beneath it. It was so much easier, and quite sufficient, to cull a few comforting and inspiring sentiments, and give them a multiple effect by constant use. By these facile repetitions Browning's "message" grew to sound like a fugue with the theme, "There shall never be one lost good." This was fine music at the time, but recently it has begun to take on the character of a hurdy-gurdy grinding out its little round of tunes—"The evil is null, is naught"; "The best is yet to be"; "I know there shall dawn a day." That is the reason the much-quoted poet is nowadays having his "God's in his heaven—All's right with the world!" continually thrown in his teeth by people whose knowledge of him is confined to that one fragment—and they evidently unaware that in its context, as Pippa's morning-song, it struck just the right note.

But what practically all of Browning's readers, those who ridicule and patronize his optimism as well as those who applaud it, are unaware of is the shrinkage that optimism suffers when scrutinized in relation to his total output. In actual amount it is far outweighed by his pessimistic pronouncements. In quality, the pessimism is the more sincere and spontaneous, the optimism labored and rationalized.

From the youthful melancholy of *Pauline* to the aged sadness of the *Epilogue* to *Ferishtah's Fancies,* the poet pours forth a fairly steady stream of testimony to the unlivableness of life. His indictments are both specific and general, and are filed against both camps in the cosmic battle—the visible pygmy, Humanity, and the hidden giant, Fate.

The historical character Paracelsus is but a transparent mask for the youth of Camberwell, himself just awakening

to the masked nature of his beautiful universe. We may be God's creatures, he exclaims, but it is certain that He takes no pride in us. Life is a poor cheat, a stupid bungle, a wretched failure, and he for one protests against it and hurls it back in scorn. With equal scorn he hurls back also the sustaining solace of immortality. Why should this world be only a makeshift, a mere foil to some fine life to come? Man must be fed with angels' food, forsooth, the unsubstantial diet of belief in his own divinity. But in that he flatters himself, for his own strongest driving emotion is not love but hate; his mind is nothing but disease and his natural health ignorance. Blind and endless is the struggle with evil, futile the frenzy to instruct those who lack the capacity to understand. Most eloquent of all is Paracelsus over the fallacy of a beneficent Providence. Let us smile at the idea that we have vast, God-given longings, satiable by lust or gold, or that we see the divine will charactered on heaven's vault that he who lifts his eyes may read. For himself, he knows as much of any such will as knows the dumb and tortured beast the will of his stern master from the perplexing blows that plague him every way. (So later said Ixion and Ferishtah's Camel Driver.) He waxes ironic over God's intimations that fail rather in clearness than in energy, as did Caliban in due time with his sneer at Setebos:

> Not He!
> There is the sport; discover how or die!

Not more bitter is Thomas Hardy over the treatment of his Tess by the President of the Immortals than is this medieval rebel over a world of Durbeyfields:

> You are to understand that we who make
> Sport for the gods, are hunted to the end.

Nay, more:

> Jove strikes the Titans down,
> Not when they set about their mountain-piling
> But when another rock would crown the work.

What could be left but the desire he expresses that the farce be quickly shuffled through to its dispiriting end? And does he then recant when on the approach of that end he has a consoling vision of the evolutionary nature of existence, in the grand perspective of which these partial evils are seen merging into a final good? Call it rather an anticipation of Francis Furini, of whom Browning suggested—

> That, on his death-bed, weakness played the thief
> With wisdom, folly ousted reason quite.

Or perchance this whole poem, together with *Pauline*, *Strafford*, and *Sordello*, the quartette forming a symphony on the theme of failure, is to be taken as a lad's sowing of his pessimistic wild oats. Did not their author recover from these growing pains and emerge into a cheerful and wholesome manhood? Was not his fifth production, the gladsome *Pippa Passes*, at once a confession of error and a peace-offering?

One might suppose so, for the passage of Pippa is so brilliant that it dazzles into obscurity the significance of what she passes. What is the dire actuality among "Asolo's Four Happiest Ones"? What is discovered about those four types of love from whose hierarchy of radiance the lonely child was to extract a reflected light to illumine her ungraced path withal? The first exhibits adultery, murder, ingratitude; the second, vulgarity blasting by a vile practical joke an artist's lustrous dream; the third, another young idealist made the cat's-paw of scheming politicians; the fourth, a high ecclesiastic hearkening to a scoundrel's malignant plots. These choice samples of human behavior, amalgamated by a rubble of spies, police, and women of the street, form a cross section of life as it is lived. These incidents are

credible realism. The violent wrenching of the situations whereby all the sinners are saved on the brink of their respective perditions by the accidental appropriateness of the passing Pippa's songs is sheer fantastic romanticism. You can chant "All 's right with the world," so long as you skirt the outside edges of it like an angel unaware; and you can make the world right by performing a row of miracles.

Yet was Browning at this time only in his early maturity. What from the ripened, clarified writer of his epic masterpiece? It is indeed in *The Ring and the Book* that the poet reaches the peak of his own mountain, and it is from this height that the panorama appears like the Dark Tower district in *Childe Roland*. Fools and knaves in high places and low, greed, cynicism, wanton torture, and selfish refusal of aid to the helpless, result in a vortex of overwhelming catastrophe submerging guilty and innocent alike. This is redeemed only by the intrepid initiative of a terrified, hounded girl, the chivalry of a priest suddenly sobered out of his convivial gayety, and the insight of a wise and saintly pope. Even this partial redemption is ignored in the conclusion to the whole matter, which is a strange reversal or nullification of what little compensation has survived. We are not to draw from the vindication of Pompilia's purity the inference that all truth triumphs in the end. "Learn one lesson hence," warns Browning emphatically, and recites that lesson as the utter nothingness of human testimony and estimation. With which whistling down the wind of mortal veracity and judgment, the curtain falls on a scene of truly Stygian gloom and ruin irremediable.

This great poem, however, momentous as it is, is only Browning's penultimate. Is not that final *Epilogue* the last word? Years before the poet had said: "I shall know, being old." Now that he is old, what does he know? Quite literally, he does not know what he is talking about. His subject is himself and his career in the next life. As to the first,

the portrait drawn is so subtly specious, mistaking as it does disposition for character and accomplishment, that it is invalidated as a trustworthy report. The second is a concluding instance of his habit of accepting hope as certainty.

In the meantime there are many other pictures of another color. There is the tale of the mischievous Apollo, who wickedly converts the Three Fates from bitterness to mirth by the judicious gift of Bacchus' flowing bowl. Even the dread divinities, as well as our human Tam o'Shanters, become glorious only when their minds are drowned in drink. And as Burns found retrospect drear and prospect fearful, so Browning (in his *Bean-Stripe*) sees "humanity reeling beneath its burden," for—

> Life, from birth to death,
> Means—either looking back on harm escaped,
> Or looking forward to that harm's return
> With tenfold power of harming.

Not more pensive is Koheleth over the vanity of human wishes, not more caustic is Omar over the futility of human hopes, than the author of *Earth's Immortalities, Misconceptions, The Last Ride Together, In a Year,* and other memorials to the frustration that comes more from a man's stars than from himself.

As for the humanity that tries to shape its own ends, or does not even try—"Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone"—the record of its "centuries of folly, noise and sin" is summarized in *Love Among the Ruins:*

> Lust of glory pricked their hearts up, dread of shame
> Struck them tame;
> And that glory and that shame alike, the gold
> Bought and sold.

In the aggregate these beings arouse in Browning only contempt, a sentiment he has illustrated many times by sar-

castic descriptions of mobs and crowds; this low opinion being offset by no brief whatever for earth's inhabitants in the lump and by very few instances of high personal distinction. Out of his battalion of men and women the poet produces a scant corporal's guard of the spiritual aristocracy, and of these none is nobly triumphant: all meet with defeat or a discounted victory. Out of man's weakness springs his selfishness, and from this under pressure are derived his deceitfulness, injustice, and cruelty.

What, then, says this present generation when asked to give a candidate for fame a propelling push along the twentieth century? It is a dubious business for any individual to play the prophet; but perhaps the consensus of thoughtful and candid opinion would voice itself somewhat as follows:

Robert Browning, as we define our terms, you look to us like a good normal mixture of the optimistic and the pessimistic, not, however, distinguished by robustness in either attitude. And since to us pessimism is no longer identified with the morbid and pathological, nor is optimism granted a monopoly of sanity and truth, you gain on the whole more than you lose by a re-evaluation.

For the tremendous popular approval that the optimistic theory has always enjoyed we account on psychological rather than ethical grounds. The universal prejudice in its favor comes from our natural impulse to elevate a biological asset to a moral plane. Man has become an expert at making a virtue out of his necessity. Reconciliation with the life he has to live is as primal a necessity as food, shelter, and companionship. The gratification of that instinct is as wise, under similar restrictions, as is the satisfaction of the others. It is precisely as virtuous as any other act of self-preservation, and not a whit more to be imputed to us for righteousness.

Accordingly, Robert Browning, the things about you for which we care the least are the very ones for which you were blue-ribboned by your own generation. They have been

allowed by default ever since, but you will now have to begin living them down. And conversely, what we prize are the darker streaks in your "veined humanity," not for their darkness, but for their richness, depth, and truth. We cannot be terribly impressed by your vaunted discovery that when you stoop you pluck a posy and when you stand and stare all's blue, since obviously if you had chanced to be stooping over the desert sands or staring at a thunderstorm, your botanizing would have been less bonny and your sky-gazing less blithe. We take little stock in the mighty to-do you make to establish your wishes as facts, your zeal in nursing your hope to keep it warm.

"Take away love," sings Fra Lippo Lippi, "and our earth is a tomb." Take away also material comfort, scope for healthful activity, recompense for effort, and religious faith, and what is our earth but a charnel-house? Yet hordes of your fellow-beings are doomed to live and die on a minimum physical and spiritual ration, and few indeed are endowed with your *aes triplex* of happy environment, buoyant disposition, and naïve theology. Since life for you never was reduced to its lowest terms, you naturally are not qualified to grapple with ultimates. Yet even you voiced this admission:

I must say—or choke in silence—"Howsoever came my fate,
Sorrow did, and joy did nowise—life well weighed—preponderate."

Here you touch the responsive chord, Robert Browning, and for this shall you be saved. Not for your love of the garish day, of shawms and trumpets, of C major and the Mode Palestrina, do we welcome and speed you on, but for the wistful minor of your *Toccata*, the ineffable unfulfillment of your *Campagna*, your confession that our joy may be three parts pain and dearly bought at that with strain and throe, your recognition that this curse will come upon us—to see our idols perish. In your redoubtable harrying of evil through Bishop Blougram, Bernard de Mandeville, Mihrab

Shah, and lesser lights, we see more of an oratorical gesture than a pugilistic blow; but in the embarrassed wondering of Karshish and in the scornful groping of Cleon—who "sees the wider but to sigh the more"—we find the simple, sincere handclasp of human fellowship. It is not your David of inspired prophecy, but the young shepherd who consoled and encouraged his friend that we love. And more than Ben Ezra, prating of "plastic circumstance," do we trust del Sarto's "So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!"

This aspect of you we appreciate not because we love felicity and blessed assurance less, but honesty more. It is not that we revel in misery and enjoy our poor health. We too "desire joy and thank God for it," although we do not expect Him to furnish it on demand. Our hearts also beat that it is good to live and learn; only we are beginning to be more concerned that we learn aright.

It is when you celebrate the heroisms and loyalties of the ambiguous creatures, discouragingly weak and incredibly strong, summoned into this life, it is when you sing of the beauty and the wonder and the power of this world, that you enter into our common human heritage of grief and bliss and mystery, and render it more luminous and endurable. And thus from your manifold pages we shall select and hold parley with Certain Poems of Importance, enshrining them along with the *Grecian Urn, Dover Beach, Gloucester Moors,* and *Pulvis et Umbra.*

VI

HIS HOMAGE TO MELPOMENE

The Muse of Tragedy, of somber mien and mournful eyes, presides with queenly majesty over her extensive realm —no less than the world of human beings—and exacts universal tribute with an air of divine right. She allows her sister Comedy to disport herself on lower levels and for brief spasmodic intervals. She delegates all minor offices to her pale, gentle cousin Pathos. But she never relinquishes her high authority nor remits her dread imposts.

Yet the terror inspired by her power is merged into admiration for her dignity. Even as she comes bringing disaster and pain, she walks in beauty like the night. The hurt springs from loss of something desired or held dear. The glory arises from the struggle that is all the more gallant for being doomed to defeat. For the essence of tragedy is catastrophe after conflict, an irrevocable loss—of fortune, life, character, happiness—not suffered passively but submitted to after bootless rebellion and fight against too heavy odds.

It might seem that a poet who was entranced with crime and calamity, who had a keen sense of the loss and frustration that attend human hopes, and who particularly prided himself on being "ever a fighter" would be quick and constant in his recognition of the tragic spirit of life. Browning does indeed pay his respects to its tonic truth, its high emotion, the strange, esthetic pleasure it yields. But there is an ever-not-quite-ness about his own offerings to the Muse of Tragedy for which another side of his nature is responsible.

His lack of a definite conception of the meaning of tragedy is shown by the inaccuracy of his own titles. *The Heretic's Tragedy* is an almost facetious description of a martyrdom.

A Soul's Tragedy is an account of a demagogue whose elaborate, though accidentally started, intrigue miscarried. But since from the beginning Chiappino was an impoverished and shallow adventurer, he had nothing to lose, in possessions, character, or happiness—and his life was left to him as good as ever.

King Victor and King Charles is also styled "a tragedy," but there is in it little struggle and no real loss. The demise of the wily old schemer after his last selfish wish had been granted could hardly be called loss of life, for many and evil had been his days, and he was ripe in years and incompetent villainy. To pass away gratified and by the instantaneous and painless method of ceasing to breathe was as fortunate for him as the others.

The temporary grief suffered by the youthful king over his unwarranted suspicion of his wife's loyalty, at that a political more than a personal matter, could not be cited as loss of happiness. Loss of character is evaded, for the sinner dies impenitent and satisfied, and the righteous live on, powerful and prosperous, comforted by the consciousness of having been kind and noble with no price to pay for facile kindness and dubious nobility. Nor is struggle portrayed, except in the effort of the young king to repair the damage wrought by the old, and that was exhilarating and successful. Yet the situation was charged with potential tragedy, wanting only the firm hand and resolute will to call it forth.

Browning's excursions into tragedy were not only few but far between, in that they were scattered over more than forty years of his productive period. They include three narrative poems (or four, counting that dime-novel, *The Inn Album*), his dramatic epic, and five of his ten dramas.

There may be a question as to the severity with which Dmitri's wife struggled before she threw her three children to the wolves, but there is no question as to her agony and the overwhelming completeness of her loss. Miranda's con-

flict (in *The Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*) was internal, between his "Castilian blind blood" and the "French and critical and cold." Badgered by unscrupulous relatives who prey upon his fanaticism, the hapless youth burns both hands off in a vain attempt to purge his soul of what had been denounced as a sin, bequeaths his fortune to family and Church, and finally ends his maimed life by jumping from a tower as a test to see if the angels will bear him up. He lands dead on the turf below, by way of receiving a negative reply.

The Italian poet is another victim of inner and outer strife ending in death because of too great a strain. Yet he is even less a tragic character than the Russian peasant or the wealthy Parisian. Aside from the key of minor mockery in which Sordello's story is told, there is a tone of agnostic uncertainty that takes the zest out of the problem. Neither of the rival political parties had a monopoly on virtue. The motif might be called the making of a man out of an artistic temperament; but to realize its pallid state we need only to contrast it with Masefield's "Dauber." It was not that the thing asked of Sordello was too hard. It was merely too hard for him.

The Ring and the Book, which in form is a connecting link between the narrative poems and the dramas, is as thoroughly tragic as anything of Browning's. It is a melancholy tale of all-involving struggle ending in all-inclusive defeat. But strife and failure are alike deficient in quality. The precious pair of schemers who plunged an innocent child into four years of misery, concluded by an atrocious violent death at the age of seventeen, could take equal honors for snobbishness, selfishness, and vulgarity. To enlarge their own sorry prestige they concocted an enterprise which cost ultimately not only their own lives but those of six guileless tools and agents. Even the suffering of Pompilia would remain on the plane of pathos if she had remained as passive and helpless as an Iphigenia or an Ophelia. In the poet's glowing ver-

sion of her courage and energy, as well as her sweetness and charm, lies the horrific story's sole claim to be called true tragedy.

The five dramas in which Browning has made his contribution to tragedy in the more technical sense are, like all his dealings with this side of life, relative; and in relative order, from the most diluted to the most concentrated, they would seem to rank as follows: *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, *In a Balcony*, *The Return of the Druses*, *Luria*, and *Strafford*.

There is much pathos in the story of a 'scutcheon so dazzling in its purity, the object of so high a devotion and cherishing pride, smirched by a blot in itself quite sweet and fair, so pure indeed that it might have remained invisible and caused no real injury by its presence. But there is barely enough conflict to put it in the tragic class.

The efforts of the youthful culprits, Mildred and Mertoun, to extricate themselves from the unseemly position into which they had drifted were too deliberate and too promptly successful to be called struggles. On the contrary, it was from lack of self-resistance, from failure to impose upon themselves a temporary renunciation, that the calamity already practically averted was precipitated. It was the one more meeting, planned after the clandestine rendezvous was no longer necessary, that spelled disaster, together with the girl's previous stubborn refusal to be candid when candor would have helped.

But, although the young lovers lose happiness and life, Lord Tresham is the tragic character, for his towering pride must struggle against the crushing blow to family honor, his tender fraternal love against overwhelming dismay and bitter contempt, and he is driven to murder in haste and repent at leisure, although he shortens the term of repentance by a swift suicide that does the double service of absolving his crime and making a quietus to his outraged feelings.

The ambiguous ending of *In a Balcony* leaves us in doubt

as to the extent of the tragedy, but whether the queen dies of a broken heart, or the two innocent plotters—for such they are—are sacrificed to her betrayed affection and revulsion to wrath, the havoc wrought by the strategem of which Constance was so proud and which proved so fatal, has its plenitude of agony. Browning has portrayed nothing more painful than the helpless, dazed bewilderment of the lover who has followed faithfully, though reluctantly, the instructions he distrusted, only to have the ironic satisfaction (never uttered, however) of knowing that his own straightforward policy would have been safe and successful, and that by the gratuitous maneuver of the woman he loved nobly and obeyed implicitly the happiness of all three was irretrievably wrecked. And nowhere is there a more pitiful spectacle than that of the queen, who, without being vain or credulous, accepts in simple good faith the love that seemed a miracle, too good to be true, yet astonishingly the truth. The immediate quenching of this new-created ecstasy, this self-revealing confidence turned back on itself in the double bitterness of loss and humiliation, produced an unmitigated torture unusual in Browning. His realism here is offset, however, by his romanticism toward Constance, whom he permits to accomplish a huge and wanton mess and die blissfully, if she does die, in the midst of it. But the whole disaster came as an earthquake, so quickly that there was no time for more than a gathering of forces for resistance; a flash of horror, a sudden shattering of beautiful structures, and all was over.

The Return of the Druses is tragic mainly by virtue of Anael, who risks, does, and loses all, although, as she also, like King Victor, Sordello, and Mildred Tresham, dies of nothing but poetic appropriateness, the loss of life is less convincingly distressful. Her happiness is destroyed, as is Strafford's, by the struggle between her fanatic love and the distrust that threatens it. But since in her very love there is the distinction between worship of the god and national

redeemer she believes Djabal to be, and devotion to the human youth, she has the latter left after the failure of the former.

Djabal himself is Browning's real "Soul's Tragedy," for he belongs with Schwangau, Sludge, Blougram, and others, to the class of half-hypocrites, semi-self-deceivers, some of whom profit and some of whom perish by their wish-fathered thoughts and vain imaginings. The Druse patriot needed so much to be the divine Hakeem that he almost persuaded himself and fully persuaded his followers that he was; but he could not persuade the unprejudiced opposition, and was obliged to stab himself to prevent a worse fate. After Anael, the greatest sufferer is the engaging youth Loys, who loses faith and friends, but even in the fury of his disillusioned knowledge cannot bring himself to slay in vengeance his former comrade and idol.

Luria is a story of self-sacrificing devotion to an ungrateful object. The allegiance comes from the warm, generous impulse of a strong character, yet being after all the homage of a foreign mercenary commander paid to the city that is his employer, it has a touch of the irrational that weakens our sympathy. When his loyal ability is rewarded by suspicion and danger of treachery, recalled too late, he is mildly bewildered rather than righteously indignant. The formal trial does finally result in acquittal, but meanwhile the hurt and discouraged alien has taken poison, dying just as the good news is brought by messenger.

Very similar in theme to *Luria* is *Strafford*, another example of a sad yielding to pressure, although in this case also the yielding is voluntary, and to a pressure internal rather than external. Externally both these loyal soldiers might have freed themselves and even retaliated for extravagant demands and broken faith; internally neither could do so, for it is easier to withstand an oppressor than to violate one's own nature.

Of the two, Strafford is more convincing, for his homage is more personal and natural. The announcement of his arrival from Ireland at the behest of Charles is made by Pym:

> "Wentworth 's come: nor sickness, care,
> The ravaged body nor the ruined soul,
> More than the winds and waves that beat his ship,
> Could keep him from the King."

This is echoed by Wentworth himself when he admits to Lady Carlisle:

> "I am his instrument
> Be it for well or ill. He trusts me, too!"

But it is a wavering of this confidence that brings him in a private interview with the elusive monarch to beg for this very trust, adding:

> "Oh—not for my sake! but 't is sad, so sad
> That for distrusting me, you suffer—you
> Whom I would die to serve: sir, do you think
> That I would die to serve you?"

That he did have to die, and that through the base connivance of this adored liege, without even the satisfaction of making his heroic service effective, is his final and deepest grief. For when the royal coward, taunted by Hollis' suggestion that doubtless he would save Strafford if putting forth an arm would do it, failed to put forth his little finger, the last thought of his victim is for his false sovereign; his last plea is for his useless existence. Denied promise of even that, his last words are:

> "Oh God, I shall die first, I shall die first!"

And thus went to his death one who would have made an unparalleled Damon, had only his friend been a Pythias. His loss embraced almost everything: fortune, reputation if not character, happiness, and life.

His conflict was sharp and doubly hard in that the outer, political opposition was the one against many; and the inner, the wearing strife between loyalty and suspicion, ended in the shattering desolation of discovering a terrible discrepancy between the idol and the ideal. At one time he laments that he cannot "tear out his heart and show it," to convince the king "how sincere a thing it is." At another he turns passionately against the profoundly hid perfidy of Charles and denounces his "heart of smooth, cold, frightful stone." He has to listen to the accusation of his old comrade Pym, that he sold his soul for a title. Hounded by the parliamentarians, he exults that it is worth while having such foes, "just for the bliss of crushing them." And after his gallant but exhausting combat, after his admission to Lady Carlisle of the weariness, loneliness, and despair that lay under his show of resolution, she had this report to make to the king:

> "He loves you—looking beautiful with joy
> Because you sent me! he would spare you all
> The pain!"

This very exclamation strikes unconsciously the keynote of Browning's tragic symphony. Genuine tragedy is an irreconcilable discord. Browning's art smoothes and attunes until his conciliating touch has produced a finish of sweet, melodious harmony. His heroes and heroines are all beautiful with joy or some compensating emotion at the end; all are uplifted by altruism or sublime resignation.

The essence of tragedy, says a modern critic, is collision between individual will and social code or moral law. "The tragic character is always a lawbreaker, but not always a criminal." However completely this dictum would be confirmed by other tragedians, it would rule Browning out entirely. By that test his offering to Melpomene would rank as zero. Not that he avoided the lawbreakers. He dearly loved a criminal and did nothing with more gusto than paint

lurid portraits of the wicked. But his canvas was innocent of the social or moral rebel. Since his own dominant attitude toward the universe was one of acceptance, he would have no eye for the grandeur of a forlorn revolt, the sublimity of desperate defiance. No Antigone, Prometheus, Miltonic Satan could come from him. His only insurgent is Ixion, and that suffering sinner gets vast comfort out of his retaliatory imprecations. With Browning, tragedy is not a cosmic thing but an individual. It springs more from the clash of human, personal relationships than from class antagonisms or the fiats of destiny operating wantonly or blindly.

Thus it is either a man against other men—not society or the universe—that engages Browning's attention, or the complex personality torn by its own civil warfare. "When the fight begins within himself," says Bishop Blougram, "a man's worth something." Many such an internal conflict does the poet portray; but when the higher side of the soul divided against itself wins, the result is triumph, not tragedy; and when it fails, the failure is usually partial, qualified, and so still untragic.

In this, if in nothing else, Browning is Victorian; here he is of a piece with his own time, that paradoxical period of eager, probing, daring, but inconclusive, thought. The total effect of the quality of his tragedy is comparable to its quantitative measurement. The tragic does exist. To it he has paid his tribute in the form of some of his best effort, including his epic masterpiece. But his best cannot be ranked among the world's best, for he was incapable of the unflinching rationality that pushes the tragic situation to its logical conclusion. His native hue of resolution is invariably sicklied o'er, not with the pale cast of thought but the roseate glow of sentiment. This comes not, however, so much from the philosophical optimism popularly regarded as one of his cardinal virtues, as from the instinctively buoyant reaction of a vigorous physique, a sanguine temperament, and a fortu-

nate destiny. Against such a mutually reinforcing triad the absolute tragic reality would strike only to rebound; it could not penetrate.

And as it is not the famous Browning optimism that contracts his tragedy, neither is it his pessimism (for he had his discouraged moods) that expands it. Indeed there is a singular lack of correlation between the two. Pessimism is unescapably dispiriting, based as it is on a belief in the utter, ultimate futility of human life. Tragedy may be inspiriting, and to Browning it was always so. The vices of the vicious serve merely as foils to the virtues of the virtuous, and the combat between them, be it to the death, and that even of the righteous, is heartening. Only in having nothing worth fighting for, lies despair.

Browning's account with tragedy is not very large, not of the highest type, conventional in its interpretation and restricted in its application. Nevertheless it is a contribution to the testimony of literature concerning the acrid and disastrous in life, its wrecks and ravages; and it has in it truth and poignancy. Its greatest lacks are of intellectual dauntlessness and a wide humanitarian compassion. Pity is rare with him and terror he knows not. His tendency to find compensation, to harmonize and reconcile, together with an incorrigible habit of being jocular out of season, dilutes the flavor of his tragic cup. Its best components are the subtlety of his analysis and the brilliancy of his presentation. This is perhaps a small enough card of admission to the Temple of Fame, but it is sufficient. It gives Browning the entrance denied to any man or artist who is wholly oblivious to the tragic aspect of human life.

VII

HIS HAPPY INCONSISTENCY

When we find theory and practice united in the holy bonds of consistency we dutifully applaud and then turn away indifferently from a spectacle which enlists more approval than interest. When we discover them at variance or divorced we linger to inquire, lured by the fascination of all discrepancies and contradictions. One of the charms of Robert Browning is the great gulf between his sayings and his doings as a poet, the more arresting because his deeds are as vociferous as his words, albeit of the opposite tone.

The main article of his creed is that Truth is Art's God and Browning is its prophet. By way of preparedness for his crusade he inscribes a number of banners with inspirational mottoes and waves them aloft.

> But truth, truth, that 's the gold! and all the good
> I find in fancy is, it serves to set
> Gold's inmost glint free, gold which comes up rude
> And rayless from the mine. All fume and fret
> Of artistry beyond this point pursued
> Brings out another sort of burnish: yet
> Always the ingot has its very own
> Value, a sparkle struck from truth alone.
>
> Well, now; there 's nothing in nor out o' the world
> Good except truth.
>
> Truth ever, truth only the excellent!
>
> Dost thou blame
> A soul that strives but to see plain, speak true?
> Mine tires of falsehood: truth at any cost.
>
> Count it a crime to let a truth slip!

Whereupon, having paid conspicuous homage to the god of things as they are, the poet proceeds to paint the thing as he sees it, gazing through a highly romanticized lens. His "perfect bard is one who chronicles the stages of all life," but his own chronicling is highly selective, carefully avoiding the dreary deserts of deprivation whereon the vast bulk of humanity is herded, and the monotonous prairies inhabited by most of the remainder, thereby permitting his concentration on the few peaks of distinction and the rare oases of vivid intensity. He did indeed "take cognizance of men and things" to startlingly effective purpose, and often recked his own rede to "paint man, man, whatever the issue." It is to this faculty and habit that we owe the dozens of choice realistic details worked into the general romantic design of his magnificent tapestry. But practically always the pattern is romantic and only the enmeshed items realistic.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of this is Browning's cavalier treatment of history. His theoretical bias toward "truth" led him into an unfortunate predilection for a basic stuff of actuality which he was totally incapable of presenting in its actual condition, for he could not be trusted around the corner as guardian of a fact. If he had been happily content to draw on his imagination for the artistic material itself as well as for its garnishing—his supply being luxuriant enough in all conscience—we should not be able to play the game of looking on this picture and then on that. But no; he must impanel his jury from biography and then boast about the authenticity of its verdict on life and human nature.

Here, for instance, is the real Paracelsus, a clever alchemist, sufficiently advanced and experimental to be called the father of modern chemistry, but personally dissolute, tricky, and boastful: and here is Browning's Paracelsus, a gentleman though caustic, a scholar though baffled, a profound philosopher, whose view of cosmic evolution provides an antidote for his bitter disillusionment.

Here is the real Strafford, a political turncoat whether or no a time-server, who plays for the highest stakes and loses; and here is Browning's, a spirit incarnate of disinterested loyalty, extravagant in his hero-worship of the unheroic, but majestic in the very tenacity of his affection and the dignity with which he bears his utter isolation, betrayal, and sentence of death.

Here is the real Sordello, dimly seen, but glimpsed as a provincial troubadour with no recorded social interests: and here is Browning's, a sensitive soul so torn between the urge of personal ambition and the zeal for altruistic reform that he died of trying to decide whether to be a Guelph or a Ghibelline.

If Browning could now be asked, "What's in a name?" and would vouchsafe the reply candid, he would have to admit that to him the chief thing in any name was an irresistible temptation to take it in vain, by using it to conjure up buzzing swarms of speculations. "Aristophanes" constitutes an invitation to put into that playwright's mouth an exposition of satire, its use and abuse, that would doubtless cause the witty Athenian to open his eyes. And Pope Innocent XII would open his mouth as well at the picture of himself, an impeccable high ecclesiastic, ranging more freely than the worst of his Molinists over the plains of cordial inquiry and modest agnosticism. Rabbi Ben Ezra might well marvel at the eminently British and modern views assigned to a Spanish Jew of the eleventh century; while the Hebrew David would be positively scandalized, not only at his own totally unsemitic philosophy but even more at the anachronism that bestowed upon him the prophetic office first assumed by Amos and Isaiah three or four centuries after his time. The prototypes of Browning's gay dog, Fra Lippo, and his acquiescent Andrea would view with amusement, if not with alarm, the formulations about life and art so undreamt of by any one of their respective days and ages. And Napoleon III

was changed in more than name when he became Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.

The most flagrant case of Browning's freedom with facts recorded and verifiable is *The Ring and the Book*, in which he is also the most voluble about his fidelity; and "fidelity" is the favorite descriptive term with the long wake of his critics and biographers, who must have been either uninformed or hypnotized. "To have introduced large quantities of fiction," observes Chesterton, "would not have been sportsmanlike." Perhaps from seventy-five to ninety per cent is not a large quantity. "Browning gives men neither halter nor halo," continues the expert in epigrams, "he gives them voices." True enough; and with these bequeathed voices they are made to construct their own halos and halters, which they deftly adjust on their own brows and necks, having meanwhile conducted a probing search for the meaning of existence and reached a profound conclusion of which their originals were as innocent as the general run of human beings.

When, however, the poet advances to the next stage of his esthetic philosophy and recognizes that, while observation and reconstruction of life are the body of art, its animating spirit is the artist's interpretation, he is less fallacious and more self-consistent. Even though the disclosures to be read in the faces around us be less important than supposed by Sordello and Lippi, still they are of more consequence than mere unread features. And even though to assert as late as the nineteenth century that

> Earth's young significance is all to learn

might seem to pay scant respect to previous explorers, it will ever be the business of the artist

> To bring the invisible full into play!

Browning himself being the last to act on his own amendment,

> Let the visible go to the dogs—what matters?

It was undoubtedly this very nineteenth-century environment that stimulated the notion of an alliance between science and art, since in the British tradition art must always be unequally yoked with something, itself ever the subservient member, ministering now to knowledge as erstwhile to righteousness. A thing of beauty may be a joy forever to the few who get their joy that way, and poetry may be a thing of beauty, though under no such obligation because its real definition is "a criticism of life." That is, when the high priestess was transferred from her pious profession of justifying the ways of God to man and detailed to laboratory duty, her majestic, pontifical robe, now somewhat shabby and out of date anyway, was turned and refurbished into an efficient uniform wherein she might the more competently justify the ways of man to God. It is in this rôle that Browning regards Art most approvingly, even when, from force of racial habit, he acknowledges her former mission. Hence he sometimes produces the effect of working a willing slave overtime, permitting her to rest through the change of occupation from rescuing Truth out of her native haunts of obscurity to bolstering up and bedecking Virtue.

Accordingly, it is this late-born but true-born Englishman whose frankly pagan Fra Lippo has moments of qualifying for the prior's pulpit, whose Andrea del Sarto is an esthetic failure because an ethical failure (illustrating Ruskin's contention), whose Christopher Smart "plays the fool and abjures his superior privilege" by stopping at mere presentation of strength and beauty without "appointing their use and defining their end." To be sure, Browning's young author of "Transcendentalism" errs in supposing that even grown men want reason:

Quite otherwise!
We see and hear and do not wonder much:

but it is his business to tell us anyhow. "What does it all mean, poet?"

Of course Browning is not unaware of the legitimate claim of Beauty upon a share of Art's attentions; she may at least rank third in Art's Triumvirate of Masters. Yet the showiest garland bestowed upon her,

If you get simple beauty and naught else,
You get about the best thing God invents,

is tied up with a homiletic ribbon:

That 's somewhat: and you 'll find the soul you have missed
Within yourself when you return Him thanks.

It was in his own subliminal soul, which he naturally never quite found, that the poet cherished beauty and felt it "pouring heaven into this shut house of life." Not even the specialists in nature have depicted more graphically the exquisite and the terrible loveliness of our planet. Not even the professional humanists have discerned more charm and allurement in the mysterious denizens of that planet. That Browning was the poet born and only semi-conscious of the operations of the genius within him is shown most strikingly in his *magnum opus*, whose achievement was not the Truth he promised but the Beauty he never mentioned. This is manifest in both the characterization and the theme of *The Ring and the Book.*

From the numerous people concerned with the original episode which formed his source, Browning selected half a dozen as his leading characters, three of whom he exalted and three debased in his own interpretation. To achieve the beauty of his idealized trio he thrice avoided a temptation and solved a problem. He rescued the innocence of Pompilia

from its threatened inanity by the infusion of the bewitching artlessness of a child and the admirable enterprise of a resourceful woman. He redeemed the chivalry of Caponsacchi from an almost inevitable priggishness by an antiseptic scorn and a mocking sophistication. He saved the wisdom of the Pope from its danger of dogmatism by a judicious blend of sweet reasonableness and stern decision. And then, as an effective foil against this complex yet harmonized beauty of character, he placed the entrancing ugliness of his vilified trio. The unmitigated scoundrelism of Franceschini, the gratuitous rascality of both lawyers—the grotesque grinning gargoyle Hyacinthus and the polished leering imp Bottinius —may be ethically inexcusable as a libel on the actual men of the old Roman murder case, but esthetically the two are indispensable to the grouping and coloring on the poet's stupendous canvas. For any of the figures to have been otherwise would have spoiled the picture.

The title of this picture its painter first wrote down as "The Resuscitation and Enthronement of Truth." When it was nearly finished he decided that "The Eternal Elusiveness of Truth" would be more accurate. Meanwhile the name it wrote under itself was "The Justification of Idealism by its Beauty." Its theme derives from *Job* and goes *Guinevere* one better. Does the priest serve God (by freeing Beauty from the Beast) for naught? sneers the misanthrope. He does indeed, retorts the confident believer, and investigation establishes his faith as the higher sagacity. There is more blindness than insight in seeing every white thing as a whited sepulcher. Moreover, we needs must not only love the highest when we see it but have the penetration to see it, however obscured by clouds of circumstantial evidence. And we are obliged to grant Browning this much, that though there may be more correctness in a distrustful reading of human nature, there is unquestionably more radiance and grace in the idealistic interpretation.

All these items—truth, goodness, beauty, and what-not—are to be grouped together as the various "works" of Art, its external effects. With its internal cause, the elemental need of the human soul for self-expression, Browning was sufficiently impressed to define such expression as "salvation." Still, it was hard for him to let himself go, and as he is never quite off-guard himself, so he seldom portrays others in their moments of utter self-abandonment. There is something fundamentally right in this probably unconscious recognition by our most extravagant poet, with all his preference for the vivid and impassioned, that the extreme is by its very nature the rare, that brilliance whether gay or lurid is but the embroidery on our uniform gray, that the frenetic cannot be either the frequent or the prolonged. And so if Browning's rapture, like his reasoning, is measurable, it is thereby symbolic of the human life that fascinated him.

It is to this fascination that we owe the presence in Browning of one notable doctrine and the absence of one commonly held by others. The creed advocated is that living itself is an art finer than any artistic account of life. The poet is the articulate creature, but not for that is he "nearer one whit his own sublime than we who have never turned a rhyme."

The creed ignored is that art offers the best escape from stern reality, this rejection being a consistent corollary indeed to the foregoing proposition. Why "escape" from a rich but wholesome banquet? The healthy man has no need to "get away" from life. His cry is not for surcease but for increase of experience. The food quickly consumed by his efficient spiritual metabolism must be replaced by more and ever more. Satiety is merely inadequacy. For him art is not diversion, for one does not wish to be diverted from what he loves, though it may be the re-creation needed at times of normal and natural exhaustion. Deadening narcotics are for

the diseased who cannot digest life; revivifying stimulants are for the essentially sound though temporarily jaded. Romance itself is not an avenue of exit for discouraged fugitives but a highway of entrance into that imaginative adventure which is one of life's own accredited realms. Browning's heaven would be much more of a Valhalla than a Nirvana. For him rather the bad taste and bathos of voluptuous exuberance than the splendidly null, however faultless.

To him, then, the poet is truly all things to all men, but least of all the elegiac lyrist. It is noteworthy both that Browning includes well over a score of artists in his roster of characters and that not one of them either pays tribute directly to that aspect of art or presents it dramatically. He did see in beauty "Art's response to Earth's despair," but its assuagement comes through contemplation rather than utterance. It would doubtless have been impossible for him to conceive of an Örnulf, Ibsen's Helgeland Viking, a tortured soul, deprived and desolate beyond the relief of tears, yet amenable to the relief of sublimely sincere expression. Such misery lay outside the scope of Browning's knowledge and apparently of his imagination also; therefore he could not tell us that a man may be roused from his apathetic gloom and reconciled to a continuation of his dreary days after, and only after, he has sublimated his sorrow into noble and gracious song. Browning's Saul was indeed sung out of his apathy, but his grief was imaginary and his persuasive art vicarious.

On the whole, it seems that Browning's vitality, being barbarian rather than classic, produced an art that was, in spite of his own devotion to Hellenic culture, more Gothic than Grecian. Nor was it his fault that his gorgeous cathedral had to stand out with alien and startling effect from his Victorian background. Rather it was his misfortune not to "nick the minute with the happy tact" either of Shakespeare, whose own Gothic creations blended harmoniously

with their Elizabethan *milieu*, or of Tennyson, whose pillared temple, delicate and severe, melted sympathetically into an environment that was harking back for its standards to the isles of Greece.

It may have been some unformulated sense of this antagonism between his temperament and his public that inaugurated the equally unrecognized warfare between the poet's theory and practice. In deference to accepted conventions he drove the abstraction Art into the realistic camp and fed it on facts cooked out of their pristine rawness in the oven of interpretation. Thereupon, his duty done, he pastured his own concrete artistries in lush romantic meadows where they might browse on the golden apples of imagination and be stayed with the flagons of prodigal fancy.

Like "de Lawd" of Negro folklore, being a creator Browning was obliged to create. In the creative process he became as a god, moving at his mighty ease among his plastic materials and shaping them into joys forever. It is a pity that he felt a call to step aside and pronounce judgment on his work and his profession at large, for in this critical process he became mere mortal. Yet what if he did? Consistency is a small jewel for the adornment of small souls. A fine large carelessness in costume is the privilege of those who sit in the seats of the mighty.

Browning's niche in that hierarchy may not be too lofty, but it is secure. He may promulgate platitudes and scatter fallacies. The majority of his myriad lines may not be poetry at all. The subtraction still leaves a sufficiently large multitude of the magic and memorable to constitute a whole galaxy of bards and at least one star of prime magnitude.

VIII

HIS STAGE AND STOCK COMPANY

Having invaded all three of the parts—dramatic, reflective, and lyric—into which the poetic realm may be divided, Robert Browning established his headquarters in the first. This lively location he used both as a permanent home, an end in itself, and as an avenue to the other two, a means of ingress into territories difficult for him to enter by any other approach. One might expect, accordingly, to find his domain thickly populated by characters in a fine ferment of self-revealing activity. Such, indeed, is the case, with the qualification that the population is far less dense per square mile of poetry than it appears at first sight.

A bare ratio of characters to poems is of course misleading, because of Browning's indifference to mere length. He writes a poem of four lines or of twenty thousand with equal gusto, and runs the gamut between his extremes with impartial agility. Still, such counting serves a purpose, if only to give us a general impression of the lay of the land.

The poet's acknowledged "fifty men and women" expand to twice that number in his total output, but this century of individuals is confined to about three dozen poems, a small percentage of the whole. This concentration in a capital city is surrounded by extensive suburbs, comprising, say, a fourth of his whole acreage, in which the urban dramatic blends with the more rural reflective and the more sylvan lyric. Here we find characters provided with a local habitation and a name but denied true individuality. It is their business to body forth their creator's sentiments and ideas. To make acceptance of a frightful theology incarnate in a Johannes Agricola, and rebellion against it in an Ixion; to typify

contented faith by one Jewish rabbi and divine discontent by another; to ridicule narrow pedantry through a Sibrandus and eulogize scholarship through a grammarian: all this was precisely to Browning's taste and pat to his ability.

Beyond these suburban mixtures stretch the sparsely settled provinces of direct and literal expression. Although they cover well over half the poet's ground, they hold but a modicum of his dramatic interest. Yet even here only a small portion is arid, dehumanized desert. Almost always there is human utterance, if only a voice crying in the wilderness; a human form, though perceived as through a glass darkly.

And by the same token, even here are found Browning's ubiquitous stage-settings for his dramatized moods and observations. Such abstractions as religion, morality, and art; such attitudes as discouragement, longing, hatred, tender reminiscence, and exultant anticipation: these are personified and seen against their backgrounds. A Venetian ballroom, a wheel in Hades, the old Roman baths, the Algerian desert, a Florentine hillside, an organ loft, an artist's attic, a Russian courtyard, such are the picturesque curtains that flash into momentary vividness as the scenic foil for some intense fragment of human life.

We must return, however, to Browning's central metropolis for an inspection of his main theater and leading performers. It is an ornate Byzantine structure, rather lavish with the bizarre and grotesque; a place in which its inhabitants feel quite at home, for they are vivacious, colorful, erratic, anything but gray and commonplace. Yet with all their distinctiveness they present a queer effect of not being genuine individuals. All fictitious characters are emanations from the creative geniuses that conceive and fashion them; but this process involves the two factors, observation and imagination. When the former predominates, the result is called realism; when the latter holds sway, we

have romanticism. The highly imaginative and strongly didactic Browning would naturally produce characters too fanciful or too one-sided to seem altogether real, although endowed with plenty of realistic qualities.

Accordingly, instead of featuring individuals playing their several parts, The Browning Stock Company consists of a roster of types, each including its own little personnel. It lines up somewhat as follows:

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE LOVER: Henry Mertoun, Norbert, Valence, and lesser lights.

THE FRIEND: Festus, Strafford, David, Loys. Interchangeable with—

THE DEVOTEE: Luria, Hóseyn, Charles of Sardinia, Djabal, Miranda, Luigi, and Caponsacchi (a cosmopolitan crew, but with no English representative). Joined on the left by—

THE MORE-OR-LESS-PIOUS FRAUD: Blougram, Chiappino, Sludge, Hohenstiel-Schwangau. Darkening into—

THE SCOUNDREL: D'Ormea, Donald, Bottinius, Franceschini, *et al.*

THE ARTIST: Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea del Sarto, Aristophanes, Aprile, Sordello, Jules, Cleon.

THE PHILOSOPHER: Paracelsus, Karshish, Innocent XII, and many others.

THE ARISTOCRAT: Tresham, Ferrara, Ogniben, Bishop of St. Praxed's, Tertium Quid.

THE BURGESS: Pietro Comparini, Half-Rome, and the Italian Gentleman of Quality.

THE PLEBEIAN: Glomerated into numerous rabbles and mobs.

The feminine leads may be reduced to three, to wit:

THE SWEET YOUNG GIRL: Pippa, Mildred, Anael, Colombe, and many unnamed.

THE VAMPIRE: Ottima, Lucrezia, Fifine, and ever so many more.

THE GOOD WOMAN (wise and sometimes witty): Polyxena, Luigi's Mother, Guendolen, Balaustion, and Pompilia.

The most useful basis for a major division of the group is the author's own classifying. Who are his heroes and villains, how many of each, raised to what degree, and why? Browning imitates life in not eliminating the extremists but keeping them in the minority. He takes his cue from nature also in not making the center of population parallel the line of cleavage between the good and the bad, or wise and foolish. Morons and rascals abound, but the sage and noble are rare. Sinners swarm, but saints are scarce. Devils are let loose upon earth, but angels are kept safe in heaven. Yet the vast majority are too complex to be dismissed with a single adjective. And their complexity is an actual mixture of positive qualities, not the flat neutrality of a vacuum, a thing as abhorrent to Browning as to nature. It is not by accident that his Tertium Quid is as distinct a personality as Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome. The eclectic is more prone to absorb than to refract. The mugwump is as likely to accept as to reject, and if he cannot reconcile his opposing forces, he must permit them to associate in a tumultuous state of warfare. It is his recognition of the human creature as a compound of discordant elements that rendered Browning infrequent in whole-hearted praise or rebuke and frequent in qualified judgment.

Among all his characters there is not one of truly heroic mold, if a hero is one who engages on his own initiative in high emprise, noble in motive, resourceful in means, intrepid in the necessary conflicts, and strong enough to win his victory. The poet's own favorite undoubtedly is Caponsacchi, and who is he? A provincial Italian priest on his own showing, and also an accomplished dilettante forced for once into a chivalric rôle which took the form not of fight but of flight, involved a possibility but no certainty of danger, and ended in disastrous failure. Count Gismond, casual as he is, is more successful. Standing next in the poet's own rating is his "golden-hearted Luria," and who is he? A

professional soldier who breaks his heart over his adopted city's ingratitude.

Yet it is not an inconsistency that the admirer of dashing enterprise and recklessness who applauds his Hervé Riel and Pheidippides, and exalts the horse Roland and the dog Tray above the timid and slothful among humans, should be so cordial to those who are guilty not only of self-sacrifice but futility in it. It is merely his subscription to the doctrine that not failure but low aim is crime, and his belief that this futility is to be tested not by its outer but by its inner effect. We are not made sure that David did anything for Saul, but his fine ministration was of tremendous benefit to himself. Ivàn Ivànovitch took liberties with law and justice both, but he got a great glow of righteous accomplishment out of behaving as the Hand of God. Even Hóseyn voiced in no uncertain terms his contempt for giving up your own oil to fill the lamp of another, and his final voluntary parting with Muléykeh preserved for himself something more precious than her ownership would have been.

Not only are Browning's heroes—such as they are—men of action, assertive and vigorous, but his heroines must not rest content with kind hearts and pretty faces. No poet ever took more delight in woman's beauty, but he loved a strong soul as much as golden hair. His Eves as well as his Adams were formed for contemplation and valor. Softness of the Patient Griselda type he had no use for, and grace, to be sweet and attractive, must be firm and self-reliant. His own chosen Three Graces, Pippa, Balaustion, and Pompilia, did indeed embody faith, hope, and charity, but they also were endowed with joy, wit, and courage. And standing somewhat in their shadow are Guendolen, Polyxena, and the mother of Luigi, rich in humor and insight as well as in tenderness.

Browning's villains are as incomplete in vice as their opposites are in virtue. No knave of his is quite absolute.

His own attitude, however, is absolute toward one class of his knaves, the passive, inert, cowardly.

For his aggressive criminals he has a sort of admiration, even tyrannic power being preferable to weakness, since weakness is of no more use when benign than when malicious. Ottima, "magnificent in sin," wins more respect than Riccardi's bride, immoral in chastity. More harm has been done by the fearful and irresolute than by the greedy and despotic. To offset the many examples of the baleful effect of hesitation and inertia, culminating in the torturing remorse of Martin Relph, there is only one of hasty and precipitate action, the slaying of Henry Mertoun by Thorold Treshám.

Another thing Browning could not endure was a "poor sport." Hence the bitterness—rare with him—over Donald, the "ingrate" who took advantage of a trusting animal; and the lack of sympathy for the Russian mother who saved her life at the expense of her children. Her failure was not so much in maternal affection and responsibility as in downright heroism. For that, off with her head. The Great Refusal is always bad, whether it betrays a lack or denies such capacities as one has; whether it thwarts one's own growth or inflicts disaster upon others.

Browning's arch-criminal is Guido Franceschini—his fullest portraits and sharpest contrasts being in *The Ring and the Book*—and is thus summed up by the Pope, who is Browning meditative as Caponsacchi is Browning militant:

> For I find this black mark impinge the man,
> That he believes in just the vile of life.

This mark in itself blackens Bottini still more, and the poet displays through him his exceeding great contempt for the cynic, but the Count is Browning's idea of a total failure, being cynic, coward, liar, and brute. Yet even he is a defrauded and miserable victim of fate.

To be fascinated by wickedness and yet bound by the conventional is to be under a strong temptation to theorize and moralize; but while Browning yielded rather easily to this dilution of his art, he could on occasion contemplate evil-doers and not fret himself because of them. It is then, in imperturbable depiction, recording evidence without verdict, that he is at his best. The Spanish monk, robust in hate; the French dancer, superb in revenge; the Roman bishop, glorying in his vanity; the Italian provincial, deliciously naïve; the philosophizing Puck, Fra Lippo; the puffing porpoise, Arcangeli; in short, all of Browning's rogues and rascals are his most delectable and satisfying characters.

If one is inconsiderate enough to look for characters that are not there, he may perceive the void he seeks. There is no example of sustained fortitude, of dogged, quiet endurance. This aspect of life lay outside the poet's interest as well as experience. Suffering in silence held no especial charm for him, and patience very speedily ceased to be a virtue. Ranking loyalty high, he found irritating the dumb devotion and secret sacrifice that form so large a share of life. Nor is there a notable exponent of constructive wisdom. From the dramatic standpoint, Browning was judicious in not demanding too much intelligence of his characters, for intelligence is death to the playwright's greatest achievement, tragedy. An ounce of foresight and understanding would usually avert tons of disaster, but without disaster the dramatist would be out of a job. While theoretically Browning would doubtless applaud the Erewhon idea that stupidity is a crime, he pragmatically welcomes enough stupidity to furnish the desirable fillip to our humdrum mortal lot.

For another absentee the clew is not so easily found. Browning's most consistent attitude toward life is his interest in growth as a vital principle and his view of development as the ultimate sanction for human existence, the compensation for its pain and loss. Yet his large cast is singularly devoid

of dynamic characters. With the partial exception of Paracelsus, Sordello, and Pompilia, they are all static, and even when in motion are merely marking time. To be prostrated by a blow or deflected by a current is a kind of activity, but not exactly progress. And of the somewhat progressive trio, the first aspired more than he attained, the second faded into futility because his reach exceeded his grasp but found heaven beyond both, and the third had all her growing to do when the story opened.

But if Browning's characters do not mount, neither do they descend. He presents no character pitiable because of fine possibilities but inadequate strength to meet the demands of life: no Tito Melema or Lily Bart. The difference between the plungings of Leonce Miranda and Halvard Solness to death from their respective towers is rather typical of the difference between Browning and Ibsen.

Yet it must be said of the Victorian poet that his characters run true to form if they run at all. Being set upon their own paths, they follow them to their appointed ends, fulfilling their own fate by unfolding their fate-given dispositions and aptitudes. The sole instance, in all Browning's company, of a personality really contradicting itself is the sudden and sentimental conversion of Ottima. And it is quite evident here that the poet was more concerned with his neat manipulation of a symmetrical scheme of action than with credible psychology. He cheerfully sacrificed what was in that case the minor issue of character to the major issue of plot. But such was not his custom, and he might well plead extenuating circumstances.

Browning's men and women playing their parts on the front of the stage, and his flitting shadows and half-embodied spirits lurking in the background, make up a goodly company and present a fairly representative cross section of life. As they file past, we see them vividly, each for his moment in the spotlight. They are drawn taut in emotional tension or

keyed up in strenuous meditation or cresting a crisis in behavior. Anyone at less than concert pitch could not hope to interest this manager of a theatrical personnel.

The Browning stage exhibits a thrifty economy whereby the effect of a great variety of rôles is produced by means of a few flexible types—types which refuse to conform entirely to the pattern. For example, Norbert, Valence, Strafford, are able statesmen as well as loyalists and lovers. Blougram, Fra Lippo, Aristophanes, Cleon, do a deal of philosophizing. St. Praxed's Bishop is less pious as a fraud than the Westminster Cardinal who frankly figures on the advantage of being a fundamentalist. Professionally Paracelsus is teacher of one science, and Karshish student of another. In years Pompilia is a child, and in position Colombe is a lady of high degree and great prestige. "Typical" is a term always to be used with this caution.

The Browning Stock Company presents numerous versions of the great human comedy, with many a farcical touch, frequent excursions into melodrama, and a permeating tragic flavor. The director himself is interested in plot and situation only as vehicle for the lines. These are of prime importance because they reveal or betray the characters. The actors in turn, whether for the nonce distracted or determined, suffering or jubilant, perplexed or dogmatic, bring news about this mysterious mortal enterprise called life, concerning which we can use any amount of testimony and report.

IX

HIS NEGLECT OF FORM

When Robert Browning in a mischievous moment had one of his characters exclaim "That bard's a Browning; he neglects the form," he was merely winging a little ironic shaft at his stupid British public. That guileless body liked him not, mainly because it found him so irritating a puzzle. He retorted by careless thrusts calculated to bewilder it still more. Serious nonconformists are bad enough, but these facetious rebels who make fun of you over their own heads are a downright pest. What are you to do with stubborn stuff that will not run into the traditional mold or fill up neatly the familiar formula?

Not that there was only one mold and a single formula, but the other English poets had with all their variations secured something of a symphonic effect, had all contributed to a great unified pattern.

If, for instance, you stretched an epic canvas you accorded it a proportionately dignified treatment. You gave it the adagio tempo, the majestic figures, the elevated theme, the serious tone. You invoked the muse and did the proper thing generally. When you embarked on a poetic voyage of twenty thousand lines and more, you did not frisk jauntily from the pier with the colloquial remark, "Do you see this Ring?" You did not churn the waters of your adventures in a junk-shop, like a snorting little tug jerking about on its small private errands. Once out of the harbor, you steered for the high seas of illustrious exploits; you did not prowl around the back-waters and turbid pools of sordid realism made romantic only by its melodrama. And when you approached

your port you made a magnificent entry with solemn grace; you did not caper in, flinging such riotous confetti as, "No, friend, this will do! You've sputtered into sparks"; and, "Eh? What ails the man?" Nor did you disembark finally with a trifling bundle of cargo rolled up in a handkerchief and come to land in your own personal canoe, ending as you began, not with your subject but with yourself. Even more than with another Excursion, this would never do!

Moreover, you observed the proprieties in minor matters. Wishing to present a tribute to a fellow-poet, you said it with flowers, not food. How could one catch gracefully such a bouquet as "What porridge had John Keats?" When you described your lady you mentioned her winsomeness and charm; you did not call attention to her scrawny hands that all but pounced like the scaly-footed hawk, and her funny mouth that would not shut. Also you wrote about normal characters, whether faerie queens or millers' daughters; you did not pick on Pacchiarottos and Baldinuccis and Hakkadoshes. You chose decorous topics, not Red Cotton Night-Cap Countries and Bean Feasts. You celebrated the pretty and picturesque in nature, not gaping jelly-fish quivering on the floor, cats in the water-butt, toads in a poisoned tank, and grass as scant as hair in leprosy. And when you made verse you fixed up neat rhymes; not gaudy, such as Theseus and knees' use, San Spirito and weary toe, Ognissanti and datur amanti, Not half! A bet? and alphabet, lambdas and damned ass, coming to a climax in

> While treading down rose and ranunculus,
> You *Tommy-make-room-for-your-uncle* us!
> Troop, all of you—man or homunculus.

Nevertheless the poet's saucy retort to all this rebuke was not wholly misplaced. His product might not suit its consumers, but the last thing the producer did was to neglect the form, and he knew it if they did not. In the lexicon of this

meticulous gentleman and expert scholar there was no such word as neglect. He might be grotesque, garrulous, pedantic; he might scorn ready-made rules, and override regulations. But he was no more capable of neglecting his poetic form than of neglecting to pay his bills or acknowledge his social obligations. Indeed this very self-consciousness that made him constantly aware of what he was doing operated to prevent the complete abandonment to emotion or vision that marks the lyrist and the seer. But if this was the real reason why he could not "crush his life to produce the wine of his art," it was also the cause of an artistry that deserves more appreciation than it has yet received. Especially in the important technical trio, prosody, imagery, and dramatization, does Browning merit some specific consideration.

It was characteristic of the poet's erratic conventionality that in all of these matters he should give himself all the rope the law allowed but never really strain at the tether. He probably would not have cared for *vers libre* if it had come in his time, although his distaste would have sprung from his fondness for order and symmetry and intricate patterns consistently followed, not from deference to tradition. He would have felt free to invent a new form if he had wanted to, only he would never have wanted to. He could find all the scope he needed in his own permutations and combinations of existing forms. But variety was for him the spice of life, and he indulged in experiments to his heart's content, and his reader's delight.

The blank verse necessary for his dramas and long poems he made into a sufficiently flexible and fluent instrument, falling short of the sonorous and sublime simply because his matter fell short. The heroic couplet he used almost as frequently though at less length. The least of his inclinations was for the iambic pentameter of alternate rhyme. And what he liked best in all the world of meters was that in which he cast his confession of taste in places. Nor was it

by accident that the nervous, impatient, rollicking tetrameter so often sprang to the stirrup and set the pace. It was the rhythm of his own bounding pulse and staccato disposition. It is in this meter that he himself "wings and sings as the bird," that is, naturally and frequently. In addition to the straight tetrameter stanza he slips in a few poems of eight-stress lines and many in which the four-stress alternates with the two- or three-stress.

This last combination produces his favorite five-line stanza, or seven; a systematic irregularity that precisely defines his genius. It was not through inadvertence, even if not by conscious intention, that Browning wrote three terza rimas and five sonnets. He wrote that many because his wide experimental drag-net brought up a little of everything, and that few because they involve the kind of effort he did not care to put forth. It is an interesting family contrast that the formal and exacting sonnet should be Elizabeth's best medium and Robert's worst, for certainly his small handful might vanish entirely and leave no appreciable vacuum in literature.

Even more significant than his prosody is a poet's use of imagery. By a man's figurative speech is unconsciously revealed his mental furniture, association of ideas, prejudices, and preoccupations. He may fondly suppose his illustrations made with malice or benevolence aforethought, but more often than not they are instinctive and foreordained by his own character. His imagination, being forged from his experience and observation, cannot transcend them. His search for the novel and distinctive will reveal only what is already in his mind awaiting the appropriate application. The genius has a huge reservoir of such treasures into which to dip ad libitum, but even a genius cannot put his finger on what is not there.

Browning's metaphoric wealth is prodigious and prodigally expended, and like his prosody shows at once variety

and restraint; the qualities of an affluent independent liberal who despises anarchy. From the two great sources of imagery, nature and human nature, he drew with equal frequency but from the latter with more unique effect.

Browning recognized in nature her mission as First Aid to the poet and saw that she did her duty by him in that station. Her offerings, horticultural and astronomical, were familiar to him and used by him with a minimum of triteness and banality. Flowers abound of course, even the classic rose, but also the vivid tulip, the undulating water-lily, the elaborate polyanthus. This last symbolized Clara, the lady who turned the tables on the Parisian philanderer who was looking for a demure spring primrose to deck his buttonhole. Yet weeds too have their symbolic uses, and fungi and vegetables. As an instance of differing interpretations, take the plebeian onion. To Ibsen's Peer Gynt it represented the pretentious emptiness of man: you peel off layer after layer, hoping to come at the central kernel, only to find at last it is all layer, enclosing nothing. To Browning's Don Juan (speaker in *Fifine at the Fair*) its multiplied coating suggested a similar protection as proper for womankind.

But with all his scrutiny of earth Browning failed not to lift up his eyes to the firmament nor to read meaning into its manifold phases. Fixed with *My Star* in the heaven of his own romance is the symbolic dark of the moon in *One Word More*. The least moonstruck of poets, with the least moonshine on his pages, he was keenly alive to the metaphoric values of that luminary, especially in exemplifying feminine beauty. One maiden is curved like the russet new moon; another is a young and tender crescent moon sleeping above her robes as buoyed by clouds.

To Browning, however, the lover of life and everything alive, it was the animate side of nature that most appealed. He shows this indeed by a delightful habit of pushing the attributes of vitality below their actual level. This sophisti-

cated animism personifies the foam of the wroth sea's wave, white as the bitten lip of hate; the mean little waves hurrying in after the pioneer crest that has conquered a foot of ground; the herded pines assembled to discuss deep secrets, a querulous fraternity; suicidal willows flinging themselves headlong in the stream, mute with despair.

No Browning code is more consistently applied than his adoption of the dumb creatures as members of the human family, and his big volume swarms and roars like a menagerie uncaged. Men, manners, and morals are illustrated by slugs, worms, crickets, hornets, and flies; by hawks, crows, swans, doves, owls, eagles, blackbirds, daws, ospreys, and barnyard fowl; by dogs, wolves, lions, lambs, foxes, ermine, tigers, bears, and bulls. Those that most enhance his expressiveness are bees and snakes.

Of himself he says,

> Many a thought did I build up on thought,
> As the wild bee hangs cell to cell.

Saul in his trance is the hibernating king-serpent. Blougram's notion of faith is Michael with his foot on the snake, the more confident because he feels it writhe. Guido is a snake hatched by mischance on the hilltop, and seeking his own level by slipping, sliding, sliddering down. The unhappy Count himself, dwelling with fascinated terror on the prospect of being guillotined, compares "mannaia's" clumsy work to the heavy ox crashing through a hedge, whereas the slender sword would be as the lithe snake that neatly thrids briar and branch and makes throb no leaf.

Yet it was human nature, its behavior and experience, that furnished the largest quota for Browning's figurative speech. And of this vast continent what is the greatest single state? Merely the gastronomic and culinary. Nor is this a matter for astonishment. The vaunted robustness of the poet's optimism may be questioned but not the vigor of his epicu-

reanism. The feast of reason and flow of soul to which he invites us often takes the form of banquet table and flowing bowl. "The poets pour us wine," is his Essay on Criticism. His picture of the crippled hunter who had been shoved off a dizzy cliff is drawn as a piece of toast soaked in a tumbler of port.

You can fairly hear Browning smack his lips over the hot toast and ortolan sandwich which prefigures the delectably stratified nature of his *Ferishtah's Fancies*, containing its *Cherries*, and *A Bean-Stripe: also Apple-Eating*. When he wishes to describe rumpled hair he says it looks like a frothy cup one blows on to cool it. And needing a simile for the unctuous laugh of his round, oily man of law he conceives it as fritters frying deep down in his larynx. This joyous gourmand himself, Arcangeli, visualizes Law as the pork substratum of the fry, garnished with Latinity, the goose-foot and cock's comb; he decides to spare a technical bone to his more academic colleague, reserving for himself the juicier breast of the argument with the happy hope of flinging the gnawed blade in the face of his opponent. He visions a copious future when his small son will be

> Trying his milk teeth on some crusty case
> Like this, Papa shall triturate full soon
> To smooth Papinianian pulp!

Of the two poles of human activity, work and play, Browning's explorations naturally veered toward the latter, the term including games of chance, athletic sports, travel, and adventure. When the former field is invaded it is in the sections adjoining recreational pastures—the military life, machinery, architecture; an emphasis inevitable on the part of one whose destiny had never steered him into the paths of mechanical drudgery or dull routine.

For the same reason that his aristocratic pages are well fed and merrily entertained are they brightly lighted and

profusely bejeweled. Candles, lamps, oil, furnish symbolic illumination, typifying resuscitation of the past, distinction between false and true, and, with an impartial application, now the futility of self-indulgence and now the uselessness of self-sacrifice. The gleam of metals and flashing of gems would have a special appeal to the lover of brilliance and preciousness. Browning uses gold as freely as though the owner of a mine. It not only illustrates the whole theme of his masterpiece but glows in many another poem. It usually indicates the real as opposed to imitation, as do also jewels—"No polishing garnet to ruby!" The pearl, the topaz, the sapphire, richly adorn the poet's tales the while they point his morals.

The imaginative habit is of course a prerequisite to poetic achievement because an essential ingredient in the artistic temperament. To the extent that it is a native endowment and not an acquired characteristic, however carefully cultivated, is its artistic product genuine, since the poet is born and not made. This is the case with Browning. He speaks in figures, for the figures come. It is the way he thinks and feels. Hence his metaphors are not extraneous ornaments, overlaid and detachable. They are the woof of his fabric, so interwoven with the literal warp that the two together form a texture neither sleazy nor coarse, having the firmness of linen and the sheen of silk. The different strands may be discerned, but to separate would be to destroy.

Quite as innate but far less simple a matter is Browning's dramatic habit. There is indeed no greater paradox in literature than that a failure in play-writing should be so eager to be a "Robert Browning, writer of plays" that for a while he wrote them to order and was boyishly anxious about their presentation; and always so incorrigibly dramatic that rarely, even in his most abstruse performances, was he direct in method. In the straight third-person narrative he took little delight, although he rather frequently employed it. His instinctive

shrinking from the straight first person actual is well known. Yet the first person imaginary is so much his peculiar and happy device that he may without challenge monopolize the credit for putting the dramatic monologue into our literature. And note his naming of poem-clusters: *Dramatic Lyrics*, *Dramatic Romances*, *Dramatic Idyls*, and *Dramatis Personae*.

This curious anomaly might be diagnosed as the very common malady of ambition minus aptitude, and let go at that, provided that two counter considerations are recognized. First, that it is not so much a malady as an aberrant kind of health; second, that the aptitude was not so lacking as is popularly supposed.

To be unable to construct an actable drama is hardly a deficiency in itself. The world has never suffered from lack of dramas, nor is likely to. But save for Browning it would have had a scanty allowance of the dramatic monologue, a member of the literary family possessing unique and striking charm.

The reason generally assigned for this inability is Browning's disregard of stage technique, his trick of retarding action by analysis, of swamping plot in a sea of speculation. It is true that his interest centers on the inner rather than the outer and that he is more concerned with character than with destiny. But in this he is neither a pioneer nor an exception. None of his actors soliloquizes more than Hamlet, none is more introspective than Brand. And in sheer dramatization of idea Browning is so out-distanced by Shaw that he is not even in the running. On the other hand, he does show decided capacity for manipulating situations and shaping pungent and significant dialogue. Certain scenes could scarcely be surpassed for effective stage éclat. Moreover, the themes of all his dramas are charged with emotional excitement and the strain of suspense.

Wherein, then, lie his playwright failure and his dramatic success? Do they stand as a plain inconsistency or are they

complementary, an instance of the securing of one at the necessary expense of the other? So far as there is a discernible difference between the dramatist and the dramatic monologist it would seem to lie in the aim of the artist. The general intent of the former is to portray life in action, whether romantic or realistic. The basic purpose of the latter is to present life in being, to reach back to the cause instead of concentrating on the effect. Not only is his dramatic situation static and his focus retrospective, but his method is solely interpretative, whereas the playwright's is more picturesque. Since then the one is gifted with observation and constructive fancy, and the other with reflection and sympathetic imagination, it follows that skill in the one branch of art does preclude to some extent ability in the other.

It was inevitable that Browning's pre-eminent endowment should disclose itself in his chief contribution to art. Whether or not he had a real faculty of guessing what people might say if they could or would speak, at least he found his own greatest pleasure in exercising what he took to be such a faculty. He was literally the prophet, the speaker-for, the articulate Aaron giving vicarious voices to his dumb brethren, but always conveying the impression of furnishing them with utterances rather than releasing their own. Sometimes he is startlingly satisfactory in his shrewd and penetrating understanding; sometimes more than exasperating in his undue intrusion of himself and consequent puppetizing of his characters. But the effect is ever the same. The only way out for any of his men and women is through Browning, and they are stamped with his seal in the transit.

Accordingly he excels in intensive flashes—an Italian suburbanite hankering for the life metropolitan, a Greek poet highly accomplished and deeply disenchanted—rather than extensive delineation; and in detached scenes—Sebald and Ottima in a hothouse, the tragic trio in a balcony—rather than the dutiful procession of Three to Five Acts whipped

into line to meet conventional requirements. As a stage manager presenting successively his conversationalists and soliloquizers, he is usually good and occasionally better; but he is at his best when he is frankly presenting Robert Browning ventriloquizing through bishops, politicians, musicians, and murderers. Then his colorful stage-settings and his flair for the sharply defined individual operate to render concrete and translate into the vernacular the abstractions which occupied his mind.

When Oscar Wilde launched his smart epigram, "Meredith is a prose Browning; so is Browning," he was smilingly approved as *vox cognoscentis*. But if he had been asked what are the signs of a poet, how else could he have defined them than in terms of heightened emotion, vivid imagination, sensitive response to beauty, and a sense of technical responsibility? All these had Browning, and added unto them a poetic creed fairly well formulated if not always consistently applied. "Song's our art," he warned a too metaphysical brother poet, "not prosaic speech." Even when he forgot this good advice and indulged in many a prosaic maundering of his own, he failed not to come to sooner or later, and return by way of both substance and style to his poetic haunts. Careful if not troubled over all technical things, he permitted nothing to go by default or through inertia. His literary fences were indeed a heterogeneous outfit and enclosed an irregular labyrinth of domain, but he kept them well mended.

He knew what he meant when he said that all art is the problem of putting the infinite into the finite—not, be it noted, the other way around—and because he did this very thing rhythmically, symbolically, dramatically, and otherwise poetically, he may be able to survive the blight of the wit and wisdom directed against his artistry.

The twentieth century may even reverse the decision of the nineteenth, or at least modify it enough to rate this bard as a somewhat poetic Browning.

X

HIS LEARNING AND IDEAS

A man presents to the world more than one hundred thousand lines of verse, and straightway the world falls into a quandary over the correct definition of his product.

In spite of all this display of prosody, says one delegate to the critical conclave, Browning is not a real poet. In spite of all his mental gyrations, retorts another, he is no true philosopher. If the subject of debate could be summoned as witness, he probably would inquire blandly whether poet and philosopher must be opposed as mutually exclusive types. For Browning could claim at least this sign of intelligence, that he recognized actual allies and mutual aids in some of our favorite antitheses, such as soul and body, thought and action, and emotion and reason. He might thereupon remind us that he had once defined the poet as the lover of beauty whose *brains* "beat into rhythm."

The profitable question, of course, concerning any writer is not vapid wonder if he could or did think, but the specific point of what,—what he thought about and what he thought about it. And since this particular writer has put himself on record as wishing only to write out what was in him, we have only to search his scriptures to find out what *was* in him.

It is true that before you can appropriate the fugitive hare to your own use you must first catch him, but before you can do that you must sight him, and as a preliminary to that you must approach his habitat. The main residence of Browning's ideas, in so far as they are separable from his perceptions and emotions, is naturally in his reflective poems. But there is so much visiting around done by the entire clan that

we are quite likely to find a dramatic poem harboring a deduction, and a conviction dwelling in the home of a lyric.

Having been located, these reflections prove to be sufficiently numerous and varied to require classification. What are the chief compartments of human thinking? How many major topics engage the attention of those who have the time and interest for such engagements? The obvious answer is that as our outer world is three-dimensional, so the lines of our meditation converge to form the really important cosmic Eternal Triangle—Nature, Humanity, and Divinity. But when one poet placed all the emphasis on the middle term with his "The proper study of mankind is man," and another amended the motion to read, "Little else is worth study," they implied at least that the triangle is not an equilateral figure. Humanity it is that occupies the foreground, with Nature behind him and Divinity above. For what is Nature but the background for man's activities, and what is God but the focus for his aspirations? As man is the only thinker known to himself, so he finds nothing really to think about save himself. His relation to Nature is either practical, as when he adapts her resources to his own benefit, or esthetic, as when he enjoys her beauty. His relation to Divinity is also practical in making religion a sanction for morality, and esthetic in his homage to the beauty of holiness. Whencesoever man's thought may start and whithersoever it may reach, it really begins and ends in himself, his needs and desires. Practical reasoning serves his needs and esthetic emotion fulfils some at least of his desires, but when it comes to that sort of reflection that formulates a philosophy of life, mankind is the only vital theme.

The one theme may be considered, however, in two aspects, individually and collectively. Browning was poet enough to prefer the former, and was far more deeply interested in psychology than in sociology or politics. And by the same token he was more given to stating the proposition

than adducing the Q.E.D. He knew a number of things about human beings: for instance, that if you are clever and restless and easily bored, and are cloistered with a kindly but stupid bromide, and have nothing to do but let him get on your nerves, your idle hands will be filled with Satan's own mischief and your heart will bubble with malice like a witch's cauldron; that if you are a beautiful woman but your beauty avails not to hold your lover against the wiles of a plotting rival, you will poison her with the keenest relish and no compunction whatever; that if you have been a worldly pagan all your life, the mere title of bishop is not going to cause you to die in the odor of sanctity; that if you are a lonely hypochondriac, half-crazed with jealousy, and have a chance to wrest a fanatic sort of triumph from fate, you are going to commit murder exultantly. But the present question is, what did Browning think about human beings, as a corollary to his knowledge? He conceived of them as distinct personalities having worth in direct ratio to their distinction. This distinction is won by the self-cultivation which is man's highest aim, for thus is fulfilled the primary law of growth and development. This is declared many times, but the most quotable mouthpiece is the husband of Elvire, who takes her out for a walk and so nearly talks her to death that the poor lady "paused pallidly on the threshold" when they finally reached home. In one of his more clarified moments he explains,

> I search but cannot see
> What purpose serves the soul that strives, or world it tries
> Conclusions with, unless the fruit of victories
> Stay, one and all, stored up and guaranteed its own
> Forever, by some mode whereby shall be made known
> The gain of every life. Death reads the title clear—
> What each soul for itself conquered from out things here:

And in another he concludes that the coming higher love will be shown in the yearning of each one to bestow upon or

share with another "its own amount of gain through its own mode of practising with life." This being possible because—

> No creature 's made so mean
> But that, some way, it boasts, could we investigate,
> Its supreme worth: fulfils, by ordinance of fate,
> Its momentary task, gets glory all its own,
> Tastes triumph in the world, pre-eminent, alone.

Naturally this triumph is not to be secured without struggle, the obstacles lying for the most part not without but within. Not so much against adverse circumstances must the fight be waged as against internal weakness and error, principally falsehood, treachery, inertia, and cruelty. Yet these enemies to virtue are themselves the offspring of ignorance. Thus it happens that enlightenment is at once our greatest affliction and our hope of salvation. "Ignorance that sins, is safe. No punishment like knowledge!" avers Ferishtah. The same doctrine is implied by Pope Innocent in his parable of the patient who died of a wrong prescription, being bled for fever when he should have been inoculated for snake-bite. The prescriber excuses his fatal diagnosis by taking refuge in the human limitation: "Call ignorance my sorrow, not my sin!" That his failure to make even a superficial search for the cause of the trouble constituted a sin of omission rightly called criminal negligence evidently did not occur to him.

This instance illustrates Browning's disregard for scientific investigation, and such poems as *Tray* and *Arcades Ambo* display his violent hostility toward certain forms of it: natural attitudes on the part of one whose theory of character was subjective, and whose hatred of any form of hurt to the helpless was intense. His oft-trumpeted devotion to Truth did not extend to experimental research at the price of suffering.

It follows that in this great human enterprise of personal development the most essential condition is liberty, and that

is of course the keystone in Browning's political creed. He was a "Liberal" according to his own account because a liberal form of government gave him the personal freedom and opportunity he demanded, and he could do no less than wish the same for others. If the same cause did not chance to produce the same effect for all others, that was an unfortunate flaw in the scheme of things, not to be remedied by shattering it to bits in default of a guaranty that the remolding would really be nearer the heart's desire. Nor, perhaps, was the flaw so unfortunate after all, since it not only proved the freedom but provided that precious initiative which is man's highest prerogative. "Liberty of doing evil gave his doing good a grace."

Although in this laissez faire doctrine Browning happened to be orthodox Victorian, the real cause lay less in environment than in temperament. What he thought of The People was, in both senses of the phrase, not much. He could depict crowds and the commonplace with ironic contempt; he could make a heroine out of a poor little silk-winder, with never a sidelong glance at the social system that made her pathetic resourcefulness necessary; he could sing "How good is man's life, the mere living!" without the briefest inquiry,

> Who has given to me this sweet,
> And given my brother dust to eat,
> And when will his wage come in?

To be sure, he could also pray God to make no more giants but elevate the race at once; he could scold a renegade radical (and soothe him by the banality of a "pardon"); he could make a scornful allusion to the Corn Law Debate; he could toss a bouquet to Italian Republicanism in one poem and applaud a young patriotic martyr to that cause in another; he could even define divinity as "a gladness that bursts into a rage to suffer for mankind"; but these momentary flashes of social enthusiasm speedily dissolve into

his gray indifference toward social reform, deepening only to drab distrust of any use or good in it. He suggests indeed that the most beneficent trial for great minds is to leave little minds their liberty to blunder on through life.

If, then, life is not a crusade, what is it? What does Browning think of this whole business of human existence? It does have to him the driving movement of a crusade but not the aim. It is an enterprise, an adventure, but it lacks the proselyting motive, the socialized spirit, the zeal for a cause, that animate the crusader. He conceives life as a voyage, a journey, but undertaken individually, not co-operatively, each one making his own way and reaching, or failing to reach, his own goal. If attained, he too would see it as a "separate star," wherein each would work for the joy of the working, world without end; only that very work, while indeed a joy, would not be an end in itself but a means to it.

What is the ultimate end? The answer to that harks back to Browning's view of the individual. It is complete self-development through perfect self-expression reacting to vivid and profound experience. To the objection that this is too self-centered and isolated an end to be an ideal vision, he has two replies that at least satisfy himself. The one is a reiteration of his individualistic ethics and the other a refuge in metaphysics.

Granted, he would say, that a racial utopia is a higher ideal than a personal paradise, how is it to be achieved? The race is but an aggregation of persons, and a strong chain is possible only by a union of strong links. Therefore the most efficient social service is self-service, for one's capacity for usefulness of any sort is based on his power and wisdom. No amount of sweet altruistic sentiment will avail to deliver the goods unless there are the goods to deliver. Altruism itself is a by-product of the higher egoism. Hence the poet's greatest doer of good, the one missionary with a hundred per cent record of success, is one who "never went to do it."

Little Pippa went out for to have a good time herself, to enjoy as happy a holiday as her buoyant heart and fertile imagination could provide—having no other resources—and her concern for her fellow-townsmen was limited to fancying what it might be like to have their fine luck, and at the end of her unwittingly magic day to wondering if her playing at touching their lives could have had any counterpart in reality. Such sacrificial altars as the poet does construct are all dedicated to personal loyalty and devotion. One looks in vain to Browning for any portrayal of self-immolation for the public weal, for he had no brief for either term of that equation. See what happened to "The Patriot," and beware!

One justifies his existence, then, by radiating his own happiness upon a dreary world, and by contributing his own character and its created product to the advance of civilization. This is as much as our finite vision can discern. Beyond that stretches the infinite view, but to perceive it we must piece out our limited knowledge with limitless faith. Browning's theology was more conventional and less critical than his psychology. He could as a rule follow a clew of human nature to its logical conclusion and be reasonable because not greatly concerned with the issue. Let the result be what it might. But when it comes to final human destiny, our baffled nescience must fall back upon hope. Hope is the child of the human need for comfort, and though but a phantom is stronger than human care for truth. Whenever it wins a battle it assumes the more convincing insignia of faith. After that it is easy to acquire the honorary title of belief. This gradual and legitimate transformation is so plausible that the next, and unlawful, step is usually taken without arousing suspicion. That is for belief to duplicate the costume of truth itself and masquerade as knowledge.

That Browning was not proof against this subtle deception is proof that he was more poet than philosopher and no scientist at all. His inability to distinguish speculation from

fact, his reliance on mysticism, his frank plea for illusion—these indicate the poet; but the poet has a philosophic vein, and therein finds the deductive method, proceeding from hypothesis back to skilfully selected data, very convenient. The heart demands its teleology, and what better mission for the mind than to supply the demand?

The question of what is to become of the soul in the hereafter, when it has passed beyond mortal ken but not beyond mortal trust, must be left to God, as it well may be. Never does Browning glow with conscious virtue more than when he announces, as one who displays a medal, that he at least believed in soul and was very sure of God. Beyond that, however, he declines to be specific. The two main themes for theorizing—the nature of divinity and the explanation of evil—held considerable attraction for Browning; but he never quite realized this essential difference between them, that the very existence of divinity lies outside the realm of established fact, while the existence of evil is the most stupendous fact in experience, the problem there being to locate the cause of it. He did see, however, that the answer to the second depends on the answer to the first. If you can assume a God of power, wisdom, and love, you can deduce evil as a mysterious means to a profitable end. It is the opponent that makes victory real, the contrast that really defines all qualities, the imperfection that renders progress possible—perfection spelling stagnation. It is not an invention of the devil, nor retaliatory penalizing for wrongdoing. It is impossible to say whether Browning's metaphysics influenced his ethics or vice versa, but certain it is that the view of misery as a divine dispensation and a blessing in disguise tends to induce acquiescence and to blur the line between remediable suffering and that inherent in the frame of things. If it is all inherent, then the whole responsibility is God's and none of it man's. This is not callous apathy but a beautiful trust in Providence. And so after all, evil is only a slanderous epithet,

a pettish term for that phase of our own good which we do not happen to relish. It is "the cloud across good's orb; not the orb itself." Why is a scorpion? That the relief from its sting may make us conscious of the blessedness of health and awaken a proper sense of our mercies. Why is an ulcer? That it may arouse an indulgent kindness toward the stricken on the part of those who otherwise would be envious of his power and resentful of his oppression. Whereupon concludes Ferishtah,

> Put pain from out the world, what room were left
> For thanks to God, for love to Man? . . . .
> From man take these away
> And what is man worth?

In pursuit of this comfortable philosophy we infer that one is not to consider that the scorpion's bite might prove fatal, or that the ulcer might afflict one of the Shah's subjects instead of himself and cause him to perish without benefit of sympathy and in unmitigated agony, or that the tyrant's enemy might be implacable and not to be softened by this appeal to his pity. Nor is one to remonstrate that this back-handed gratitude and this sentimental affection are not the highest conceivable virtues, being on the contrary irrational in the last analysis. Such perception the poet implies might institute a campaign against scorpions and ulcers, to their eradication and the flabby degeneration of the human species; for "when pain ends, gain ends, too."

Yet there is a vital truth in this insistence on the fatal flaw in idealism—that the realized ideal immediately becomes an unideal state—and Browning was within his logical rights in making it the most persistent refrain to his favorite theme of the glory of growth. His most forceful and dramatic version of it is in *Rephan*, the story of the inhabitant of a sphere where perfection actually obtained. The others were apparently satisfied, but this one questioning, active soul was so dis-

contented that he was obliged to migrate to earth, where one might attain happiness through the opportunities of imperfection. Genuine promotion is from the perfect to the imperfect. Akin to this is the earlier notion, in *Paracelsus*, that even when every individual is developed to his full power mankind will be only in its infancy, and in its maturity the utmost will be a painful attainment of joy, kept human by hope and fear and love. As to the next world, the caution that there is to be no "flying secure and glad from heaven to heaven" is an anticipation of Anatole France's dry comment on just such an artless picture by the astronomer Flammarion.

Heaven, of any kind, is not only the residence of formerly human spirits, but the abode of deity, whether singular or plural. Browning was intensely interested in religion. Among his best poems are his picturesque dramatizations of religious experience, of many varieties and the widest range. All of these are tinctured with the reasoning by analogy, but the two that are based upon it afford a most striking illustration by contrast. Caliban's Setebos is Caliban plus power. David's God is David plus power. Was the brutish slave envious, bored, capricious, and wanton? "So he!" Was the gracious, intelligent youth full of sympathy and fired with a zeal for service?

> "Would I suffer for him that I love?
> So wouldst thou—so wilt thou!"

That Browning instinctively preferred deduction to induction, inference of the probable to discovery of the actual, is indicated also by his theory of knowledge, which always exalts insight and revelation over investigation.

Metaphorically, our ideas are but cobwebs spun across the dome of truth and obscuring its divine gold. The enchantment lent by distance softens discord to harmony and allows the glow-worm to pass for a star. The rough, rusty rock of

reality is revived into fresh life by a wash of a magic wave from the Unknown. Knowledge is a sleepless harpy, docile and harmless so long as it is kept chained, ready to serve if its bonds are loosened, but ruthless to destroy if entirely released. It is a wolfish hunger, ravening its prey.

Literally, our thoughts are inherent, and truth an imprisoned splendor for whose escape knowledge and expression form the avenue. That being the case, the main difference between the imbecile and the sage is in the degree of the transformation from potential mental energy into kinetic. Through Paracelsus, Browning sponsors the rather extravagant notion that the primary endowment is the same in all cases, but the bound soul remains ignorant while the released becomes informed and aware. Complete and universal development of innate faculties would produce a race of supermen —an idea we suggest every time we use the word *educa*tion. Corresponding to this internal situation is the external one in nature felt when her very silence arrests you and

> You half believe
> It must get rid of what it knows,
> Its bosom does so heave.

It would seem then that Browning had quite his full quota of prejudices, opinions, sentiments, and convictions, and quite a normal lack of original ideas; an idea being defined as a perception of hitherto unperceived resemblances between phenomena, and the establishment of new connections and relationships. He was no more of a metaphysical scholar than the rest of our poets, but like all poets he had a certain fondness for popular philosophizing. This fondness was a consistent trait throughout his life, although especially prominent at the two extremes, in his earliest and latest writings; it sometimes sidetracked his dramatic and lyric impulses, but never obtained an undisputed right of way. When dominant it attacked such subjects as individual ethics and

spiritual idealism. Social ethics and mundane idealism lay low on Browning's horizon, and he was so little concerned with scientific progress that he could live and write for three decades after the *Origin of Species* created a panic in his Victorian world and never allow a Darwinian shadow to darken his pages—nor a Huxleyian flash to illumine them.

The snobbish sort of critic takes pleasure in pointing out that a poet, Byron, for instance, or a novelist, such as Dickens, is deficient in mentality. The favorite phrase is, "but when he attempts to think, he becomes a child." Since men are but children of a larger growth, to whom maturity comes hard if at all and in whom childishness persists to the very end, it would be more accurate to cite these as the race's most gifted children. They are at least crying for the light, while the others are too benighted to realize how great is their darkness. It was Goethe himself (one of these critics) who said that man was not born to solve the problem of the universe but only to state it. The vast majority are unable to do even that because stating it presupposes a perception of its existence. Browning was intellectual enough to see life as a problem and to formulate some of its propositions, and if he was not intellectual enough to discern the difference between a scientific and a speculative solution, he was therein but human. And if he never did stalk a new idea worth the salt to put on its tail, he salted down many an old one into extremely neat and pungent epigrams.

Whatever Browning's philosophy lacked, the lack came not from being "truncated," as Santayana claimed, but from the size of the ground plan. He peaked his own pyramid right enough, but it was a replica of the numerous other pyramids with which the Sahara of human ignorance is pathetically populated. Its distinction lies in the exquisite carving of some of the detail. And such as it is, it illustrates the great primary law of thought, that it is not native nor instinctive but provoked only by dire necessity. Had this

poet's destiny been more disastrous he might have become a more profound thinker, but he might not have been for that a more skilful artist, and he certainly would have been a less zestful and exhilarating person.

It can be said of Browning's whole establishment that it at least included an immense storehouse of learning and a busy little idea-factory. But it was equipped even more amply with a laboratory of souls and an artist's studio. The owner presided over it all and wandered at will from one part to another. Possibly he fancied that his contributions to knowledge and thought were of major importance; and some of his readers have vastly overestimated them. On the other hand, it is possible that the importance of knowledge and thought may be overestimated. If a little learning is a dangerous thing, a great deal may be fatal.

In any case, there is no doubt about the value of beauty and humor and joy. These are their own justification and—unlike virtue—their own reward. And of these Browning has furnished his full share, throwing in for good measure the unpoetic but useful qualities of sound common sense and practical sagacity. He was a pragmatist long before William James popularized the term and the doctrine, and threescore years ago he tossed off in two lines the whole import of Warner Fite's new volume on Morality.

> It 's wiser being good than bad;
> It 's fitter being sane than mad.

When we have fully translated that simple philosophy into conduct it will be time to ask for something more searching and profound.

XI

GOLD AND ALLOY

A certain sunny June morning in 1860 was for Robert Browning among his most memorable, long to remain "still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm." Yet on the face of it nothing much happened. The poet was at his favorite sport of prowling around the enticing streets of Florence. Over toward the northwest, at one corner of San Lorenzo Square, he paused by an open-air secondhand booth and scanned its offerings. There was the usual jumble of tarnished picture-frames, chipped mirror-sconces, tawdry ornaments, piles of etchings and chalk sketches, a scrap of tapestry, bronze-bureau-knobs, and half a dozen dog-eared books.

Among these last was a volume bound in vellum and containing a collection of documents, some in Latin, some in Italian, the majority in print, the rest in script, the whole forming a record of a sensational murder trial that took place in Rome in 1698. This caught the browser's roving eye with the compulsion of a magnet, and a glance through it confirmed its value. It featured a law case. Good, for Browning, like his father before him, was interested in legal contests. Himself so law-abiding that he might have kept far from the wrangling crowd, he was from choice quite a courtroom fan, though it is to be feared his zeal was of the unholy variety that comes to scoff and sneer. Then this old memorandum left the real problem unsolved. Still better, for Browning loved a mystery and reveled in conjectures and speculations, particularly in the field of human motives and springs of conduct. And finally, it hinted the kind of romance that called for a chivalrous and idealistic interpretation. Best of all, for Browning was a man of sentiment who

happened also to be fond of sharp contrasts. So his encounter with that square, crumpled old book was nothing short of an act of Providence.

Its delighted finder promptly paid the one little lira—then about fifteen cents—asked for his treasure, and without wasting a moment read it as he walked along home, absent-mindedly threading the narrow, crowded sidewalks, skirting the piazzas, crossing the bridge, turning corners, until he climbed the stairs at Casa Guidi, master of its strange contents.

But startling as was the story in *The Old Yellow Book*, the marvel of it is well matched by the story of *The Old Yellow Book*, itself a dramatic tale, though happily less calamitous than the one it unfolds.

Although the Franceschini tragedy was enacted in Arezzo and Rome, it seems that a Florentine attorney named Cencini had some correspondence concerning the trial, and he probably was the one who collected the various papers, bound them between covers, and compiled a title-page and table of contents. During the eighteenth century this curious volume may have been a family heirloom, but by the nineteenth we can imagine it banished to the attic, and thence consigned to the curio dealer for the tourist trade.

After it was resurrected and clothed in immortality by an ardent poet it was bequeathed to Balliol College and remained at Oxford until the twentieth century. At the time of the World War it was deemed a wise precaution by the authorities to bring it up to London and preserve it in the Hall of Records.

Meanwhile the reading public was obliged to take the poet's word for the relation of his epical production, *The Ring and the Book*, to its inspiring source, *The Old Yellow Book*. And that word he made emphatic and unequivocal. He called the "pure crude fact" of the original story the pristine gold, unmalleable until fused with the proper

amount of alloy. This alloy was found in his own interpretative imagination, and with its aid he fashioned the "ring"—his version of the baffling circumstance. His reconstructing fancy was declared, however, no irresponsible guesswork, but a thorough and honest quest in search of the hidden truth; an entirely successful quest, we are assured, a triumphant pursuit and capture of those shrouded verities that had hitherto defied investigation. That is to say, the "ring" presented the facts of the "book" without any wrenching or falsification, but with the just explanation that rewards patient study and clear insight. It is not fiction but authentic history, poetic in form and spirit but as truthful as any encyclopedia.

Now since this assertion of the essential identity of source and derivative was made by one who had a monopoly on inside information, it was naturally accepted without question. Who was anybody to challenge that eminently veracious gentleman, Robert Browning, or who could bother to consult the original, even when, in the 'nineties, it had been made to a limited extent accessible?

Therefore everybody, perforce and yet willingly, played the game of follow the leader for forty years, and then went right on with it through choice, or sheer momentum, after the necessity had been removed.

It was an American, Professor Charles W. Hodell, who removed the necessity. In 1908, acting for the Carnegie Institute, he published a facsimile of *The Old Yellow Book*, together with translation, introduction, and notes. Later an abridged edition in the Everyman Series broadcast the once exclusive matter, and since then, who will may hear Francesca's story told, as formerly who would had heard Pompilia's story told.

And the stories are not the same, in spite of the poet's vehement declaration of their unity, for Pompilia is Francesca plus Browning, and that means an agile step from the

realistic to the romantic. The incredible thing is that this discrepancy evidently escaped the notice of Mr. Hodell, after all his scholarly research. How he could give us so invaluable an aid to the understanding of Browning, and at the same time fail to realize its significance, is astounding. But he too harped on the poet's "fidelity to fact" and simply reinforced the prevailing notion.

Thus (except for the brief pioneering made in an early draft of this chapter in periodical form—see acknowledgment on page x above) the error flourished without let or hindrance until 1925, when *The Old Yellow Book* was re-examined, re-translated, and re-evaluated, this time appropriately by a jurist, Judge John Marshall Gest, who most urbanely yet conclusively avenged his profession for the drubbing it had received from an irate antagonist.

The difference between the two translators is pithily symbolized by the keynote quotations from the poet himself, chosen to decorate their respective title-pages. Professor Hodell's "So absolutely good is truth" fronts you with a grave and innocent air, begging to be taken literally. Judge Gest's "All for truth's sake, mere truth, nothing else!" winks at you with sly, mischievous irony.

The spirit of irony indeed has presided over the whole affair. It was a paradox that this incorrigibly reticent poet should choose this particularly unsuitable occasion to go out of his way to unlock his heart to the public gaze. It was a quaint, unconscious joke that all this unaccustomed, garrulous, and gratuitous detail should constitute just so much more rope for his own entanglement. It was an anomaly that the one critic who made the first direct and intensive comparison of the poet's "book" and "ring" should still remain so completely under the spell of the latter that he could only echo its unjustified claim.

"Truth," says Hodell, "is a master word throughout the poem." Moreover, Browning "might have made his prob-

lem easier if he had assumed an arbitrary power over this new province" and had not "felt himself peculiarly circumstanced in his creative activity by the truth of the materials." The editor even goes so far as to account for the poet's choice of theme from actual rather than legendary material on the ground that in the latter there might be less scope for the exercise of his reverence for truth and his genius for veracity.

All of which leads up to and requires this present, if not final, ironic situation—that in the interests of that very truth to which Browning offers such eloquent lip-service, we are obliged to declare that, while he was unquestionably self-hypnotized and sincere, he did in paying his homage to reality say it with words rather than deeds. The point of this whole discussion is not that the poet protested too much when he needed not to protest at all, but that he protested his devotion to truth and that his protest has been for so long fully accredited. If Browning had claimed for his transmutations of Book into Ring the virtues of beauty, grace, humor, vividness, knowledge wide, eloquence high, wisdom deep, there would be none to say him nay and none so poor to refuse him reverence. But in his deliberate choice to waive these many assets he did possess and with a somewhat truculent vehemence assume the one virtue least in evidence, he exhibited not only the naïveté of self-consciousness but the vice of that very falsity he so pugnaciously repudiates, elsewhere as here. No one questions in the least the poet's right to add, subtract, divide, and multiply to suit his esthetic purpose, to deck his obscure facts in iridescent fancies, to draw copiously upon his imagination to interpret their significance, provided that he assumes his privilege of garnishing and sublimating actuality with the same unconcern with which it is granted, and refrains from avowing in the very act that he is doing none of these things but quite the opposite.

In the first place, Browning muddles his own metaphor until it becomes a treacherous quagmire. Granting that his alloy is fancy, he maintains that "fancy with fact is just one fact the more," a confusion of subjective with objective fact, whereas distinction between them is highly important. And when he inquires if the fiction which makes fact alive be not fact too, he again betrays his indifference to a line that must be drawn by any apostle of truth. Anon he apologizes for his dilution as being necessary to provide

> No dose of purer truth than man digests,
> But truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now,
> Not strong meat he may get to bear some day.

Possibly the Victorian British public that liked him not would have respected him more had he talked to it as man to man rather than as cryptic oracle to milk-fed babe. Certainly the twentieth century should be grown up enough to endure this darkly-hinted strong meat which no longer need be reserved for future use.

What is there, then, in the poet's "alloy" more than the tempering of the "gold" to make it malleable? Two things; one a matter of quantity, the other of quality. So large an amount of the original ore is rejected and so large an amount of the new admixture infused that the mere change in proportion has a transforming effect. To this is added the transforming effect that comes from a prejudiced interpretation, the ingenious manipulation to line up such facts as are used in support of a preconceived theory—the very thing Hodell asserts explicitly Browning does not do! Here are a two and two that make an exceedingly large four.

The quantitative alteration is brought about both in details of the action and in the cast of characters as a whole. A score or so of items found in the Book have been quietly expunged from the Ring. Some of them, though forming capital stuff for realistic fiction, are quite inappropriate to

romantic poetry: such as the inventory of feminine apparel which the Signora is accused of abstracting from a locked chest, the key of which "she took from her husband's trousers"; the question asked by the Count's workman if he "were ready to give his wife a beating"; the poignant but unpoetic circumstance that when Francesca found the assassins upon her she blew out the light and tried to hide under the bed. Others are evidently suppressed as too damaging to Browning's cause: such as the letter of Guido's uncle to Pietro Comparini, in which he alludes to "the fine row" in the Archbishop's Palace; the letter to the same from Albergotti, telling how the Signora "made a big disturbance because she did not wish to go and sleep with Signor Guido, her husband"; and the terms of Signor Pietro's will. The significance of the letters is that they spoil by their very existence the important contention that Pompilia was utterly cut off from communication with her parents and that they were in entire ignorance of what was going on in Arezzo.

For these omitted epistles Browning has substituted, among his many inventions, a letter from a Venetian visiting in Rome at the time of the execution; one from Bottini, designed still further to blacken his character, in which is included a verbatim report of an imagined sermon; and a postscript to the note from Arcangeli to Cencini, deepening another false impression.

It is, however, in the cast of characters that the additions are most momentous, the omissions, though greater in number, being of less importance. Of the nine speakers of monologues in *The Ring and the Book*, four are practically imaginary and one quite so, a proportion of more than half. The distribution of these forms a curious symmetry co-ordinating with the poet's symmetrical plan of three groups with three speakers in each. Each triplex in the triad is composed of a pair for whom there is some basis in the original, plus a third largely or wholly fictitious.

This matter of quantity is so bound up with the qualitative metamorphosis that separation is very difficult. Characters manufactured out of whole cloth or from the smallest of samples are necessarily products of the creator's fancy, but as a matter of fact these of Browning's are no more so than the four drawn most directly from the source, two of whom are degraded and the other two idealized with an equally distorting effect. Yet in the face of this thorough discrepancy Hodell announces his discovery that "Even the architecture of the poem, its unusual plan, seems to have been devised with the purpose of the fullest truth-telling concerning the material before the artist."

Browning's nine dramatis personae may be reduced to six actual personalities, as the trio representing public opinion are frankly types, one invented, and two suggested by the anonymous pamphlets circulated in behalf of the pro and con of the notorious Franceschini-Comparini feud. One more reduction is as much in order, since the Pope does not appear at all upon the original stage and furthermore his action from behind the scenes is known only through reference to his upholding the decision of the court, "having well weighed the evidence." Innocent XII was of course a verifiable personage, the only one of historical rank in the story, and described indeed as a man of fine, high character. But neither from *The Old Yellow Book* nor from ecclesiastical biography did the poet get his mellow sage, voicing a profound and emancipated philosophy; his interpretation being as ridiculous in fact as it is sublime in conception.

Nor is Count Guido Franceschini, albeit the chief actor in the tragedy, much more visible above the horizon in his own person. It is right there that the Book is most bafflingly non-committal. Although its whole theme, its *raison d'être*, is the determination of his precise legal status as a murderer, although there is much argument about him and about, yet evermore he holds his peace. From him there is no depo-

sition, no letter, nothing but a brief document giving to his brother Paolo power of attorney in his affairs. Our actual knowledge of this silent bone of contention is the scantiest. An impoverished aristocrat (the youngest of three brothers instead of the oldest, as Browning makes him) at the age of thirty-six (ten years younger than in Browning's version) contracted a bourgeois marriage on a commercial basis. The ceremony took place Sunday morning, the sixth of September, after a due publishing of the banns (not in secret on a dark December evening). Four years later he with four accomplices stabbed to death his wife and her foster-parents, eight months after she had fled from home in the company of a priest, and a fortnight after she had given birth to a son (the crime taking place at the Comparini Roman residence and not in the suburban villa which was another of Browning's fabrications).

There is indeed one welcome supplement to this exceedingly meager record, a portrait. The Count thus becomes the only one in the drama whom we can visualize, but this advantage in fact becomes a disadvantage with respect to our confidence in Browning's pen-portrait of the man behind the mask. On the *ex pede* principle the poet might have constructed plausibly enough his monstrous villain Herculean in crime, but operating in a rude, clumsy, violent fashion; as boorish and blundering as his peasant assistants and as incapable as they of the finesse and acumen with which he is so lavishly endowed by his faithful delineator. If behind that dull, stupid countenance there did lurk a brain capable of cajoling judges and bribing priests, of confessing to a strain of the sentimental cavalier, of hatching an elaborate scheme for getting rid of his wife and keeping her dowry, and of executing this plan with adroit skill and patience, of justifying his course by the sanction of a well-formulated social and moral philosophy, then one might indeed ask, "What's in a face?" Yet we are assured by

Hodell that "in the remaking of Guido Franceschini the poet has dealt honestly with the material before him." It may be honest to deduce greed from brutality, and craft from greed, to invent such details as Guido's experience with the Church, his suit for divorce, the letter by which he was informed of the birth of the child, but to invest this blundering simpleton with the "cynical scorn" before which shrivel "the ideal virtues and graces of life," is to extract sophistication from the stolid, a thing psychology forbids. With all the will in the world to forge the mysterious love letters, the Count's "unforeseeing mind," as Arcangeli justly terms it, could hardly have summoned the wit; a lack his contemporaries seemed to have realized, for Lamparelli alone suggests the bare possibility of the authorship so taken for granted by Browning. In pursuit of his own theory the poet is not content to let his arch fiend off with the single monologue sufficient for the others, but exploits him through two of the longest, one of them staged under wholly invented circumstances.

Another proof of Hodell's contention that "fidelity to his material became a matter of artistic conscience" to Browning, and that the original characters "were no mere fictitious creations which he might shape or reject or amplify as he pleased," lies in the miraculous conversion of a matter-of-fact young cleric who maintained simply that he saw his duty and did it, albeit reluctantly and because urged thereto by an importunate young woman, into a triple extract of Galahad, Persius, and Saint George. We do meet Caponsacchi in the Book through his own deposition and the rather problematic part he did play in the story, and have therefore some basis for first-hand impression.

One of the poet's ways of being "true to the Book in all its details" was to take great pains to be accurate about a totally insignificant trifle and then proceed deliberately and for a purely sentimental reason so to falsify recorded and

unquestioned fact that the result of his punctilious research was misapplied after all! It seems that Browning wished his hero to refer to the new moon on the night of the flight, and in order to verify this prodigy he procured De Morgan's register of lunar risings for centuries back. But he also wished this heroic episode to occur on April 23 because that is Saint George's day, and since it was so inconsiderate as to have occurred on the twenty-ninth, there was nothing for it but to push the calendar back a week or so. It was on this falsified date that the moon was "new."

Not only the stage-setting for Caponsacchi's monologue did the veracious Browning invent, as he did Franceschini's first, but the whole implication of the content: his biography, attitude toward his profession, situation in Arezzo, and the glorified Platonic romance that crowned his career. For any romantic aspect of the affair the only warrant in the Book is, by a curious freak of circumstance, the collection of letters repudiated distinctly by the two accused of writing them, and used most dramatically by Browning to enhance their nobility and the vileness of Guido. What Browning does not see fit to mention is the priest's testimony that letters were exchanged between him and the Signora relative to arrangements for the flight; some of hers being sent by a servant, some flung from her window, and one of his being pulled up by her on a string. The awkwardness of this admission lay in Francesca's repeated declaration that she did not know how to write (although she did write a note to her father from Castelnuovo). The most personal remark of the priest's concerning his protégée was as to the absurdity of the love-letter charge, "for she was a modest young woman and such actions would be out of keeping with her station and her birth." This was sufficient for the building of an impassioned adoration, a chivalric devotion, by an architect who "made it a principle to use fact as he found it," who would not "substitute a substantiated fact of the Book by one more agreeable to

his feelings." Hodell adds, "Such fidelity is doubtless a handicap to creative activity," and accounts for it on the ground that Browning had "come to share the regard for fact which is so characteristic of the scientific nineteenth century."

An even more glaring manifestation of Browning's "reverence for the truth" shines forth in his manipulation of the love-letter crux. The real Caponsacchi's affidavit that there was an innocent exchange of missives but no other kind suffers a sea-change in the assertion of the poet's Caponsacchi that there was an incriminating exchange of missives and no other kind. The latter is original also both in his theory of their forged origin and his description of their contents, for in no case does he even paraphrase those of the Book; his version is quite new and perfectly adapted to his version of the whole situation. Equally original is his account of Pompilia's conversation with him, at variance with both their depositions, while his vehement vituperation of the Count has just this much foundation—that the Canon, being asked if he were a relative of Franceschini, replied that he was not; and that he is quoted by Lamparelli as saying to Guido, "I am a gallant man, and what I have done, I have done to free your wife from the peril of death."

It is in his idealization of this rescued wife that Browning reaches the highest point of his auto-hypnosis. In addition to his exalted presentation of her as the heroine of his story, the poet has given this bit of outside revelation: "I assure you that I found her just as she speaks and acts in my poem, in that old book." That may be, but anyone reading with unholden eyes is constrained to find her quite otherwise.

Her speech as revealed through her own deposition is succinct, prosaic, and spiced with a certain self-confident asperity. Her testimony conflicts at so many points both with that of the priest and with verified facts that it is at least open to suspicion.

Her actions are veiled behind the same impenetrable mystery that shuts us from all the characters; but the total impression is of a victim of most untoward circumstances, exploited from first to last, in an equivocal position, either partly of her own volition or altogether by force, and finally destroyed by a terrific penalty either wholly undeserved or partly the meed of her own folly.

Browning's Pompilia speaks with the tongue of men and of angels, and acts as though the combined mantles of Antigone, Desdemona, and the Virgin Mary had fallen upon her sanctified shoulders. By her own account her voluntary conduct was animated by maternal passion, a mature sense of responsibility and devotion combined with a childlike pride and joy. It was for this that she gave up her state of passive endurance, for its bliss that she pardoned the wrongs that preceded it, for his part in it that she worshiped the soldier-saint who rescued her, and looked up to him in an ecstasy of gratitude.

The thorough nature of the transformation is shown by such obvious contrasts as these: that from the Francesca of the Book we have not one recorded syllable concerning the child; that her avowed reason for flight was fear for her own life; that she was capable of retorting rather tartly to her husband concerning his disappointment over her sterility and his jealousy of younger men; that she took the escort of the priest quite as a matter of course, having rebuked him, indeed, for the dilatory manner in which he was carrying out the plan she had urged upon him. It is thus that Browning persuaded Hodell that he "would not misrepresent the truth for her sake." It is thus that "the incidents of the tragedy, even when compromising to Pompilia, whose cause he championed, are used without repression or falsification." He merely took a young Italian girl, by birth bourgeois (or worse, according to Violante's tale), the facts of whose story it is impossible to come at, commonplace save through her

suffering, and breathed into that common clay such breath of magic life that it became an ermine soul; at once God's gift whereby He

> showed for once
> How He would have the world go white,

and

> Earth's flower
> She holds up to the softened gaze of God!

It is precisely because the Juris Doctor Bottini stopped short of this that Browning slimes him over with a calumny quite as gratuitous, quite as complete, and quite as diabolically clever as that which he asserts the lawyer perpetrated upon Pompilia—only it happens to be the poet's assertion which lacks the proof.

That Browning's headstrong emotionalism should have betrayed him into flagrant injustice is not strange, but it is curious indeed that the whole flock of critics should have trotted along so docilely after him. They not only permit him, "in his abiding conscientiousness in the use of fact," to weave a conscienceless web of falsity, but they second him in giving no credit whatever to the inherent difficulties in the lawyer's position. As Advocate of the Fisc, appointed by the Court for the Prosecution, it was his task to show that the murderer had no provocation and was therefore guilty in the first degree. As the defense was based on "injured honor," it was sufficient to urge, as Bottini did, that the plea "had no foundation in fact and was irrelevant in law." To be versus Guido did not require him to be pro Francesca beyond that point. Being a mere attorney without benefit of poetic license, he was obliged to recognize and cope with certain stubborn items marshaled by the opposition. To ignore them, to contradict them, or to interpret them unreasonably, would be to offer an advantage to Arcangeli which that official, not

being quite the fatuous fool that Browning makes of him, would be quick enough to seize. To rebuke him for "his frank admission of the possibility of his client's guilt" is rather absurd, considering first that the then-deceased Signora Francesca was not his client, and second that all that certainly could be said of the charge preferred against her was that it was not proven. Certainly it may be said of Bottini that he performed his official duty in a capable manner and that his diagnosis of the case is more conformable to the data actually submitted than is Browning's. Supported by his colleague Gambi, he refutes every refutable point presented by the other side, puts the best possible construction on its accusations, and admits nothing he is not compelled to by the evidence, some of which includes testimony from his "client" worth more to the opposition than to him. In our estimate of such admissions it makes all the difference in the world whether the man's tongue is in his cheek or in its proper place. There is no warrant whatever for reading into the Fisc's arguments one continuous, sly, insinuating leer or for presuming that they emanated from a salacious egotist who deliberately smirched a figure of pure alabaster in order to display his skill at whitewashing.

Equally patent as proof that Browning was "scrupulously, but never laboriously, accurate to the facts before him" is the delineation of Arcangeli. It is here truly that "the poet affords one of the most remarkable illustrations of literal and detailed accuracy in the use of the raw material of art." This raw material consisted of a set of six arguments divided evenly between Arcangeli and Spreti, similar in tone to those of the other side, uniformly courteous and technically resourceful.

Representing the Defense, the Procurator of the Poor fulfilled his official obligation by endeavoring to commute the death-penalty of a murderer. To do this he had to assume the conjugal unfaithfulness which constituted the

"extenuating circumstance" but which he could no more prove than the Prosecution could disprove. In a sincere, forcible, manly way, Guido's attorney does his duty by his client, concluding with sufficient sagacity that even if the claim of injured honor were not established, the mere suspicion of it would induce a morbid state and serve to mitigate a crime which was "great indeed but very greatly to be pitied."

From this material the expertly veracious poet created a flabby, frivolous, ignorant, irresponsible fraud, puffed up with blubber and vanity, eaten up by jealousy of his rival, pride in his little son, and animosity toward the Pope. For none of these details is there the slightest authentic hint. In claiming that there is not only hint but whole cloth, Mr. Hodell is uniformly content to pronounce his unsubstantiated generalities, but the almost sole instance he does cite is significant. He points out that Arcangeli's peroration is lifted bodily from the original. So it is; but here also it makes all the difference in the world whether a statement comes as a logical conclusion and climax to a serious and substantial argument, or as an inconsequent finale to a farce.

It appears that both lawyers are not only professionally inefficient, dealing in jargon and sophistries, but ethically deficient as well. "They have little conviction as to the right or wrong of the case." One might ask, why any, indeed, seeing that they were appointed to uphold their respective sides, and that the more one studies this strange case the less he is inclined to be opinionated. "They used Pompilia with little reverence." Again, why more? seeing that they were not romantic poets, sentimental to the point of fanaticism. Respect and consideration she does have from both, even her legal opponent, who regards her as an unfortunate victim. "Not the slightest drop of human pity warmed their hearts." That is, Bottini's references to "the luckless and wretched girl," "the unhappy child," his vivid picture of her helpless misery, his thrill of horror over her dire extremity;

Arcangeli's earnest protest against the infliction of torture on his clients, his apology to "the ashes of the dead" for seeming "to disturb their peace"—these are not to be accepted at their face value, because "Whenever there is show of sentiment, its rhetorical parade betrays its insincerity." They are also accused of flippancy, and excused on the ground that "Ovidian quip and Ciceronian crank" are innate to jurisprudence. In that case these representatives show considerable restraint. For literary embellishment Arcangeli quotes from Juvenal once, Bottini once each from Ovid and Cicero, all three quotations being dignified and appropriate. In fact the only difference between the lawyers of the Book and of the Ring is that from the former we get not a facetious syllable and from the latter not one of soberness.

Thus it is that "Browning, the lover of truth, follows it honestly, even to the giving of many facts and motives of the story which run contrary to his own interpretation and his own sympathy in the case." His facts he selected and rejected with too much freedom to render unduly impressive the "final proof of exactness" in his reproduction of "thirty-three proper names, with various correct items in geography and chronology." As to the motivation, ten per cent would be a liberal estimate of the proportion actually revealed in the source to the poet's affirmation of it in his product. Moreover, the ninety per cent of invention is something by way of carrying coals to Newcastle, since its underlying purpose was to do what had already been done. Browning organizes a mighty though single-handed crusade to rescue from infidel hands the sacred shrine of Pompilia's reputation, and behold, the Paynims already had been routed decisively and with great slaughter, through the valiant efforts of the Counsel for the Prosecution, the testimony of its witnesses, the decision of the Court, the sustaining of that decision by the Pope, and the Instrument of Final Judgment against the Convertites secured by the Advocate Lamparelli.

But the poet is embarrassed neither by his futility nor his failure to hit his own target. "Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale?" is his rather bristling query. Nay more. If truth were able to take its own part, sufficient, self-sustaining, why then—

> Yonder 's a fire, into it goes my book—what loss?

Tremendous loss, we reply, and irreparable, but not to the interests of historical truth.

Browning truly did "fuse his live soul and that inert stuff," but the concluding process was a complete reversal from that described in his own metaphor. He did extract the alloy and there "justifiably golden" rounded his ring. But it was the "pure crude fact" that was whisked away as the alloy, and it was his live soul minus the inert stuff that remained to form the "lilied loveliness" of his golden ring. That he mistook the identity of his ingredients and called gold alloy and alloy gold is merely evidence that his genius was, as a poet's should be, imaginative rather than ratiocinative. Had he been able to distinguish between his materials, and satisfied to discard his basic alloy after it had served its purpose, saying little or nothing about it, the poet's great masterpiece would be under no indictment and in need of no apology.

As it is, his friendly readers must come to the rescue with the gentle reminder that *The Ring and the Book*, being a poem, is not science but art. Trite and obvious enough, but called for because of the author's own extraordinary intent to subordinate its art to its science. And so, since he was really in this instance the victim of his own hallucination, it is genuine appreciation and not captious complaining that exonerates the artist while deploring his indulgence in pseudo-science.

The rich, crude ore Browning detected in *The Old Yellow Book* is still there, waiting to be mined and smelted by just

the right modern realist. He too will have a sympathetic imagination and a tender heart, but his liberated mind will have no traffic with double-dyed villains, flawless heroes, and superlative saints. His novel or drama will be chiefly concerned with raising the curtain on those four years in Arezzo. In the clearest light will stand the lovely little Signora Francesca against her gloomy background. This child-wife of a sallow, taciturn, suspicious husband, torn suddenly from her little girl playmates, her dolls, her doting parents, will be seen at first bewildered, hurt, perhaps vaguely resentful. Then as she gradually adjusts herself, she will realize the uselessness of pining for her gay, colorful Rome, for the warm, cozy home in Via Vittoria, for the merry days of protected childhood. And, being a lively, enterprising young woman, she will make the best of the bad bargain wished upon her. The Franceschini palace is a dungeon and the town is dull and dreary. But a few gleams filter through. Even a virtual prisoner can go to the theater and to church. She can wheedle cousin Conti, be demurely sportive with the Signor Doctor, and, most exciting of all, imitate the romances she reads and dramatize her own misfortune. This she does by carrying on an intimate correspondence with the attractive and accomplished young Canon Caponsacchi. And when she is made to pay so terribly for her instinctive snatching at her meager dole of brightness and joy, we shall grieve for her woeful lot and for all thwarted and pitiful lives.

And until Francesca thus comes into her own, she is better left to herself and not confused with Pompilia. As for the poet's deliberate confusion of the two, we can dimiss that with his own words:

> Good, to forgive;
> Best, to forget!

XII

CRITICS' GARNER

Those who through choice or circumstance find their interest in Robert Browning extending beyond the random browsings of the casual reader are confronted by the double requirement of familiarity with a voluble poet and his even more voluminous critics. And before this secondary matter even the specialist may quail. To explore its vast bulk means time lavishly spent and largely wasted. The labor of many a critical mountain has brought forth only a mouse. The poet's commentators have, as he said whimsically of himself, "written a great deal too much." *Sic semper* when strong provocation encounters no inhibition and little prohibition.

Browning's poetry is of an unusually challenging nature; just obscure enough to be tantalizing, just deep enough to seem profound, just dramatic enough to be exciting, just romantic enough to be alluring, just enough of its own age to express certain of its accepted convictions, just universal enough to reveal new vistas.

All this was bestowed upon a generation that took itself and whatever happened to it very seriously, and found in Browning's grain a rich grist for its moralizing mill. For the remainder of his century the grinding went steadily on, though naturally with diminishing speed and smaller returns.

The outline history of Browning's treatment by the British public during the nearly threescore years of his poetic activity does not lack variety. No poet has met more vicissitudes of reputation or experienced greater extremes of critical temperature. It is symbolic that not a single copy of his first poem was sold on publication and that later one copy brought

over $1,000 and another about $2,400. And if for twenty years he was nearly suffocated by fulsome eulogy, it no more than made amends for almost forty years of frosty indifference tempered by little showers of ridicule.

The early, and prolonged, charges against the new poet were that he was unintelligible, uncouth, and unimportant. There was some justice in this, but it was a stubborn public that rejected the peace-offering of *Bells and Pomegranates*, and would not let a young man retrieve his *Paracelsus* and *Sordello* with his *Dramatic Lyrics* or even with his *Men and Women*. And what contemporary poem was it that scored decidedly over this last volume? What but *Aurora Leigh?* It is a sad irony that Mrs. Browning did not live to see her own generous judgment of her husband's work confirmed to any extent, though she lived till 1861.

It seems strange to us now that it was *The Ring and the Book* that won the poet's belated recognition. It displayed all the faults previously complained of and added a few new ones. Of course it must be remembered first that Browning was not entirely without honor in his own country by that time, and second that the verdict on his *magnum opus* was not unanimous. Still the pronouncement of *The Athenaeum* may stand both as the poet's first award of whole-hearted, unqualified praise and as a record of the majority vote. It called *The Ring and the Book* "the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare," and added that "its intellectual greatness is as nothing compared with its transcendent spiritual teaching."

Right there in a nutshell is the clew to Browning's popularity with the late Victorians. The 'seventies and 'eighties were times when men's souls tried themselves and measured literature with an ethical rod. The "decadent 'nineties" revived the esthetic test, and the first quarter of our century has continued the struggle between the two standards, as

though they were real rivals. For this exercise, Browning makes a particularly choice case in point.

One evidence of the prevailing ineptness is the unanimity of opinion about the two legal monologues in *The Ring and the Book.* In casting about for a possible reduction of the "inordinate muchness" of the mammoth poem, the critics have pounced with one accord upon the attorneys. *The Athenaeum* began it by rating them as "unartistic, merely clever." The first biographer stepped into line with the verdict that these two books are "more tiresome and more unnecessary than the most inferior of the three opening sections—the first of the two indeed is intolerably wearisome, a desolate boulder-strewn gorge." Other notables who would throw the rascals out are *Littell's Living Age,* Leslie Stephen, John Morley, Stopford Brooke, Frederic Kenyon, Hugh Walker, and Ethel Mayne. And, for the latest instance, here is Walter Hampden playing "Caponsacchi" in the poem's first dramatized—and absolutely lawyer-less—version. It might be observed in passing that perhaps one secret of this repudiation may lurk in the fact that one critic refers to the *sons* of Arcangeli, another to the *children* of the *lawyers,* and still another to the *eldest daughter* of the Attorney for Defense. Lone little Giacinto seemed to induce polyopia in his beholders.

Now evidently none of these objectors caught the point of Browning's own explanation in the first book, "Then, since a Trial ensued—." The earlier critics may, of course, be excused for not considering the source beyond the poet's consideration, but to the later ones *The Old Yellow Book* was available, in which the legal pleas and arguments form the entire structure and about sixty per cent of the space.

Moreover the poet's treatment of these two officials is one of his most artistic performances. Through them he has achieved an expertly effective dramatic contrast, and has at the same time fulfilled his own pet purpose of satirizing

their profession. In addition he has secured through one the needed comic relief, and through the other a more subtle vindication of his heroine than could have been accomplished in any other way. The truth is that any elimination would have more nearly to end than to begin, with these legal lights; and that the only valid protest is against the injustice that declared the light that was in them to be darkness. But the critics have taken the other tack because apparently they wanted either easy entertainment or moral uplift, and the last thing they thought of was artistic effect.

In suffering under vacuous, inane, and misleading comment, and even more from the worship of admirers than from the carping of detractors, Browning merely endured the common lot of creators, and he got some compensation out of his own pungent retorts; but he really did have more than his share of estimates either empty or false. Of all the published *Browning Society Papers*, for instance, not one would be worth preserving in a new anthology of criticism, though the Boston output rates on the whole higher than the London. For over twenty years *Poet Lore* devoted much space to Browning, as he was one of the journal's main interests. Out of those dozens on this subject I should select only Brinton's essay as holding interest for modern readers.

The most discriminating adverse criticism has come from Paul Elmer More, George Santayana, Irving Babbitt, and Felix Schelling. But they are all disposed to look at Browning from the academic point of view and to disparage him not so much for failure to reach his own goal as for choosing a goal which could not meet with their approval, a test by which anybody could rule out anybody else.

To the present generation the greatest relief comes from the tacit subsidence of Browning the Missionary, the high tide having cast up enough material to last for all time. A five-foot shelf would scarcely contain the volumes on Browning as a Religious Teacher, as The Preachers' Poet, as a

Nineteenth-Century Prophet. Books are devoted to his message, his theology, his optimism—above all the optimism of this eagle-hearted poet. Even the twentieth century has produced The Browning Tonic, Browning for the Blues, Browning for the Trenches. The waysides are strewn with pious Browning Calendars, unctuous with Beautiful Thoughts and Treasure Troves. So great a change has recently occurred, however, that the time seems about ripe for the *Zeitgeist* to manifest itself in a Cynics' Calendar from Browning.

One Browning claim has already been staked out in a modern field. In a technical journal not long ago appeared "A Psychoanalysis of Browning's *Pauline*." Here we find the old ecclesiastical and ethical jargon supplanted by the new scientific jargon, sounding ever so learned and esoteric. And since the pioneers have wisely begun at the beginning, they have immense prospects ahead before reaching the *Epilogue* to *Asolando*.

Browning lends himself with liberal versatility to all this interpretation, for he is a man of moods as well as an expert ventriloquist. One moment you hear a voice declaring that life means intensely and means good, and the next it announces that life is a confused mass of fact and surmise slipped in between an idiot's gibber and a mad lover's ditty. All men hope and see their hopes frustrate and grieve a while and hope anew: and yet all their dreams shall come true. On one page "acquiescence is vain." On another "desistence is sage." Browning was as flexible as the Dinosaur:

> No problem bothered him a bit;
> He made both tail and head of it;
> And he could think without congestion
> Upon both sides of every question.

Or, as a recent writer has put it, the poet "relaxed in verse, ate in it, sometimes slept in it, put forward his best foot and his worst foot, his deepest feelings and his foolishness."

When a many-faceted personality impinges upon the facets of many other personalities, diversities—not to say discrepancies—are bound to appear. A fair proportion of Browning criticism does orient itself against a philosophical background and show a degree of apperception. Plenty of valuable information is available. Sensible analysis and sane conclusions abound.

In his last London garden Browning kept a pair of geese, which he called Edinburgh and Quarterly, after that pair of vociferous magazines. Critics, he said, are human geese. They can only cackle when benevolent and hiss when malicious. He would admit, though, that the critical pond harbors other fowl. Occasionally thereon a duck dives adroitly and brings up a trophy, a swan swims gracefully to the point.

In order to furnish some sort of prospectus for those who may wish to explore the labyrinth of Browningiana, I have endeavored to compile a classified bibliography. For readier convenience it is divided according to types and forms. And since the date of appearance is important in many instances, the items, except those under the head of Separate Essays from Various Sources, are arranged in chronological instead of alphabetical order. The inevitable impulse to attach also a brief bibliography of Mrs. Browning has been followed.

Knowing from my own experience how useful a word of description or a statement of relative ranking may be, I have ventured to add such information. The necessary brevity of these pronouncements is bound to make them sound curt and dogmatic. But they are offered in all modesty, not as infallible oracles but as honest individual opinion, to be taken for what it may be worth.

XIII

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT BROWNING

BIOGRAPHIES

1890 William Sharp: *Life of Robert Browning.* (Great Writers) Walter Scott

Prepared in haste to follow hard upon the poet's death; somewhat inaccurate and ill-proportioned, but judicious and readable.

1890 Edmund Gosse: *Robert Browning—Personalia.* Houghton, Mifflin

Combination of reminiscence and obituary.

1891 Mrs. Orr: *Life and Letters of Robert Browning.* Houghton, Mifflin

Based on material supplied by the Browning family; copious but loosely organized and rather undiscriminating.

1899 Arthur Waugh: *Robert Browning.* (Westminster Biographies) Kegan, Paul

On the whole the best pocket edition.

1899 Elisabeth Carey: *Browning, Poet and Man, a Survey.* Putnam

Nothing new or distinctive, but well printed and illustrated.

1903 G. K. Chesterton: *Robert Browning.* (English Men of Letters) Macmillan

A piece of flamboyant journalism, not exactly in line with this supposedly scholarly series; padded with dogmatic and irrelevant lucubrations, and decorated with misleading statements. A smartly sophisticated volume delightful to read as diversion and stimulus.

1904 Edward Dowden: *Robert Browning.* (Temple Biographies) Dutton

Ample in substance and systematic in method.

1905 Frank Marzials: *Robert Browning.* (Miniature Series) Bell

Another handy condensed edition.

1905 Charles Herford: *Robert Browning.* (Modern English Writers) Dodd, Mead

Not striking but adequate as a medium-sized lucid account.

1910 W. H. Griffin and H. C. Minchin: *Robert Browning.* Methuen

Begun by the former and completed after his death by the latter. Most voluminous and scholarly of all the Lives. Contains considerable new matter, and is so far the definitive biography.

1911 Lilian Whiting: *The Brownings, Their Life and Art.* Little, Brown

Practically nothing new about the Life or valuable about the Art; old material presented with spirit and enthusiasm. Some anecdotes, however, directly from Mr. Barrett Browning and an account of him. Interesting pictures.

1915 William Lyon Phelps: *Browning: How to Know Him.* Bobbs, Merrill

One of the popular "How to Know" series; of the "Introduction" type, including sketchy recital, fluent analysis in the affable, informal manner, and fifty poems quoted in full.

1916 A. R. Skemp: *Browning.* (The People's Books) Dodge

Small elementary volume.

1918 Ernest Rhys: *Robert Browning and His Poetry.* Harrap

Brief literary biography with much quotation; union of Anthology and Life.

1923 Mrs. Frances M. Sim: *Robert Browning, Poet and Man.* Appleton

1924 Mrs. Frances M. Sim: *Robert Browning, Poet and Philosopher.* Appleton

These companion pieces belong as much to the commentary class as to the biographies, and scarcely deserve a place in either. Still, the compilation of excerpts and synopses is made with smoothness and grace.

LETTERS

1895 *Letters from Robert Browning to Various Correspondents*
Edited by T. J. Wise and printed for the London Browning Society.

1899 *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.* Smith, Elder
Publication authorized by Mr. Barrett Browning.

1906 *Robert Browning and Alfred Domett.* Smith, Elder
Letters by these two and Joseph Arnould, edited with preface and connecting comment by Sir Frederic Kenyon.

1912 Harriet Hosmer: *Letters and Memories.* Moffat, Yard
Edited by Cornelia Carr, and containing some particularly piquant and vivid Browning episodes related by their devoted young American friend.

1923 *Letters of Robert Browning to Isa Blagden.* The Baylor University Press
Edited by Dr. A. J. Armstrong. Invaluable documents for their light on the poet's later years and for a first-hand unique revelation of his own personality.

COMMENTARIES

1887 James Fotheringham: *Studies of the Mind and Art of Robert Browning.* Marshall

James Fotheringham: *Studies in the Poetry of Robert Browning.* Paul, Trench
Verbose and heavy. Long paraphrases and pedantic elucidations.

1890 T. J. Nettleship: *Robert Browning. Essays and Thoughts.* Mathews
About half reprinted from his earlier panegyric. Second part toned down but still rather exuberant.

1890 W. G. Kingsland: *Robert Browning, Chief Poet of the Age.* Jarvis
A rhapsodic but sincere personal tribute.

1891 Henry Jones: *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher.* Maclehose
Champion heavy-weight in ethical exegesis.

1897 Arthur Beatty: *Browning's Verse Form.* (Columbia University Dissertation)

1899 Marion Little: *Essays on Robert Browning.* Sonnenschein
General discussion of five or six topics.

1902 Stopford Brooke: *The Poetry of Robert Browning.* Crowell
Shows background, perspective, and careful analysis.

1903 James Douglas: *Robert Browning.* Hodder & Stoughton
Although one of the Bookman Biographies, it relegates the biographical items to a fine-print tabulated appendix. The small volume is merely a vivacious essay, profusely illustrated.

1904 Thomas Rain: *Browning for Beginners.* Sonnenschein
A series of imaginary lectures, frankly done for self-diversion and therefore diverting to others. Mild humor and sound judgment.

1904 Elizabeth Gould: *The Brownings in America.* Poet Lore Company
An account of the poets' reception in this country. Interesting information entertainingly presented.

1906 Frank Lockwood: *Robert Browning.* Eaton & Mains
In the series, "Modern Poets and Christian Teaching."

1906 Lily Bess Campbell: *The Grotesque in the Poetry of Robert Browning.* (University of Texas Dissertation)

1911 Thomas R. Lounsbury: *The Early Literary Career of Robert Browning.* Scribners
Story of the young poet, his public, and critics. Important material and sagacious conclusions.

1912 Helen A. Clarke: *Browning and His Century.* Doubleday, Page
A centenary commemoration, preceded by her *Browning's Italy* and *Browning's England.* More about the century than about Browning. Careful and extended comparison of the poet's ideas with contemporary thought.

1913 Ethel Colburn Mayne: *Browning's Heroines.* Chatto & Windus

1914 Pearl Hogrefe: *Browning and Italian Art and Artists.* (University of Kansas Dissertation)

1915 Vernon C. Harrington: *Browning Studies.* Badger

Pleasantly informal exposition, condensed from classroom lectures.

1918 J. W. Powell: *Confessions of a Browning Lover.* Abingdon Press

A candid record of his experience with the poet. Made readable by attractive personality.

1921 Margret H. Bates: *Browning Critiques.* Morris Book Shop, Chicago

Elementary but lucid and entertaining.

1923 Frederick A. Pottle: *Shelley and Browning; a Myth and Some Facts.* Pembroke Press

A bit of genuine research, small in scope but of important bearing.

1924 C. N. Wenger: *The Aesthetics of Robert Browning.* (University of Michigan Dissertation)

1925 Arthur Compton-Rickett: *Robert Browning: Humanist.* The Dial Press

An exception to the ruling-out from this list of Selections and Anthologies, made because of the novel system of arrangement and the interesting prefatory essay.

TREATISES ON SINGLE POEMS

The only poems to which entire volumes are devoted are *Sordello*, *The Ring and the Book*, and *Parleyings with Certain People.* Of these treatises the more important are the following:

I. "Sordello"

1886 Caroline H. Dall: *"Sordello," a History and a Poem.* Roberts

1886 Annie Wall: *Sordello's Story.* Houghton, Mifflin

1913 A. J. Whyte: *Browning's "Sordello."* Dent

Edited, with text, introduction to each book, and copious notes.

1914 E. H. Thomson: *The Tragedy of a Troubadour; an Interpretation of Browning's "Sordello."* Mathews

II. "The Ring and the Book"

1908 Charles W. Hodell: *"The Old Yellow Book."* Carnegie Institute

Photographic reproduction, translation, preface, and notes. Translation later published in the Everyman Edition.

1910 F. B. Hornbrooke: *"The Ring and the Book"; an Interpretation.* Little, Brown

Superficial and sentimental; no reference to the then accessible source.

1913 Sir Frederick Treves: *The Country of "The Ring and the Book."* Cassell

A picturesque reconstruction of the story, charmingly done.

1920 A. K. Cook: *A Commentary on "The Ring and the Book."* Oxford University Press

A scholarly and invaluable compendium.

1925 Judge John Marshall Gest: *"The Old Yellow Book."* Chipman Law Company

A new translation with complete notes and critical chapters on the poem, its source, the medieval legal code, and related subjects. This treatment of "the Roman murder case" from a jurist's point of view and by a well-equipped specialist is a notable contribution to the subject.

III. "Parleyings"

1927 W. C. De Vane: *Browning's Parleyings: The Autobiography of a Mind.* Yale University Press

A detailed study of these "People of Importance" with reference to the poet's use of them in revealing his own development.

SEPARATE ESSAYS FROM VARIOUS SOURCES

Studies of the period, such as Payne's, Stedman's, and Walker's, are taken for granted. Others include:

Bagehot, Walter: "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning," in *Literary Studies.* 1864

Benson, A. C.: "Robert Browning," in *Along the Road.* 1912

Birrell, Augustine: "On the Alleged Obscurity of Mr. Browning's Poetry," in *Obiter Dicta.* 1884

Bonner, H. C.: "Robert Browning," in *Nineteenth Century.* 1924

Bradford, Gamaliel: "Browning and Sainte-Beuve," in *North American Review.* 1910

Brinton, Daniel: "Browning on Unconventional Relations," in *Poet Lore.* 1892

Bronson, Katherine: "Browning in Asolo," in *The Century,* 1900; and "Browning in Venice," in *Cornhill Magazine,* 1902

Chapman, J. J.: "Browning," in *Emerson and Other Essays.* 1898

Cheny, John Vance: "What about Browning?" in *The Golden Guess.* 1892

Collins, J. C.: "Browning and Butler," "Browning and Montaigne," "Browning and Lessing," in *Posthumous Essays.* 1912

Crook, R. E.: "The Gladstone-Browning Controversy," in *Littell's Living Age.* 1905

Cunliffe, J. W.: "Elizabeth Barrett's Influence on Browning's Poetry," in *Publications of the Modern Language Association.* 1908

Elliott, G. R.: "Shakespeare's Significance for Browning," in *Anglia.* 1909

Farrar, F. W.: "Robert Browning," in *Men I Have Known.* 1897

Figgis, Darrell: "Robert Browning's Vision," in *Studies and Appreciations.* 1912

Galton, Arthur: "Mr. Browning," in *Urbana Scripta.* 1885

Gosse, Edmund: "Browning in France," in *More Books on the Table.* 1923

Grant, Percy S.: "Browning's Art in Monologue," in *Essays.* 1922

Head, Franklin: "Some Methods of Browning," in *Studies in Medieval and Modern History.* 1899

Hearn, Lafcadio: "Studies in Browning," in *Pre-Raphaelites and Other Poets.* 1922

Hood, Thurman L.: "Browning's Ancient Classical Sources," in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology.* 1922

Hutton, Richard Holt: "Mr. Browning," in *Literary Essays.* 1892

Innes, Arthur: "Browning in Particular," "The Ring and the Book," in *Seers and Singers.* 1893

James, Henry: "The Novel in 'The Ring and the Book,'" in *Notes on Novelists.* 1914
Other comments in *Views and Reviews,* and *Essays in London.*

Kelman, John: "Robert Browning the Hebrew" and "Robert Browning the Greek," in *The Noble Lectures.* 1924

Ker, W. P.: "Browning," in *English Association Essays and Studies.* 1910

Littell, Philip: "Browning," in *Books and Things.* 1919

More, Paul Elmer: "Why Is Browning Popular?" in *Shelburne Essays, III.* 1907

Morley, John: "The Ring and the Book," in *Studies in Literature.* 1891

Nevinson, H. W.: "The Poet Lovers," in *Books and Personalities.* 1905

Noel, Roden: "Browning," in *Essays on Poetry and Poets.* 1886

Palmer, George Herbert: "The Monologue of Browning," in *Harvard Theological Review.* 1918

Pinero, Arthur: "Browning as a Dramatist," in *Browning's Centenary.* 1912

Ritchie, Anne Thackeray: "Browning," in *Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, and Browning.* 1892

Saintsbury, George: "Browning," in *Corrected Impressions.* 1895

Santayana, George: "The Poetry of Barbarism," in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion.* 1900

Schelling, Felix E.: *Two Essays on Browning.* 1890
Pamphlet reprint (University of Pennsylvania).

Scott, Dixon: "The Homeliness of Browning," in *Men of Letters.* 1923

Scudder, Vida D.: "Browning as a Humorist," in *The Life of the Spirit in Modern English Poets.* 1897

Shanks, Edward: "Robert Browning," in *The London Mercury.* 1925

Shaw, J. E.: "The 'Donna Angelicata' in 'The Ring and the Book,' " in *Publications of the Modern Language Association.* 1926

Stephen, Leslie: "Browning's Casuistry," in *The National Review.* 1902
Reprinted in *The Eclectic,* 1903.

Trent, W. P.: "Two Estimates of Browning," in *The Forum.* 1903

Tupper, J. W.: "A Defense of Chiappino," in *Englische Studien.* 1912

REFERENCE BOOKS

The most useful Introductions, with or without Selections, are those by William Alexander, Hiram Corson, and Arthur Symons. Other reference books are as follows:

1885 Mrs. Sutherland Orr: *A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning.* Bell

1891 Edward Berdoe: *The Browning Cyclopaedia.* Swan, Sonnenschein

1891 G. W. Cooke: *The Browning Guide Book.* Houghton, Mifflin

1896 Marie Ada Molineux: *The Browning Phrase Book.* Houghton, Mifflin

1921 Aurelia E. Brooks: *Browningiana in Baylor University.* Baylor University Press

This complete and comprehensive bibliography includes all previous smaller lists. Its thoroughness makes it extremely valuable, although its usefulness is somewhat diminished by lack of any annotation. Hundreds of names and titles in alphabetical order, entirely unsifted and with nothing excluded, furnish bulk of information but present no aid in the way of discrimination or relative values.

In this connection it might be mentioned that the only Browning Anthology deserving of special mention also comes from Baylor University; a volume of poetic tributes to the poet, edited by Aleph Tanner, under the caption, *Homage to Robert Browning.*

1925 L. N. Broughton and B. F. Stelter: *A Concordance to the Poems of Robert Browning.* Stechert

A tremendous accomplishment, in two large volumes, for which all students should be grateful.

STANDARD EDITIONS

Not including the Collections made during Browning's life, nor the various Selections and Anthologies.

1889 Complete Works, 17 volumes. Smith, Elder

1894 Globe Edition, 2 volumes, edited by Kenyon and Birrell. Macmillan

1895 Cambridge Edition, 1 volume, edited by Scudder. Houghton, Mifflin

1898 Camberwell (Florentine) Edition, 12 volumes, edited by Porter and Clarke. Crowell

1899 Riverside Edition, 6 volumes. Houghton, Mifflin

1908 Everyman Edition, 2 volumes, edited by Waugh. Dent

1909 Fireside Edition, 6 volumes. Houghton, Mifflin

1912 Centenary Edition, 10 volumes, edited by Kenyon. Smith, Elder

1914 *New Poems by Robert and Elizabeth Browning*, edited by Kenyon. Macmillan

Undated New Century Library Edition, 6 volumes, edited by Finley. Nelson

FOREIGN CRITICISM

For his own Continental interests and enthusiasms Browning was awarded only a mild reciprocity. One significant sample of this is the fact that the commemorative tablet now affixed to Casa Guidi pays an eloquent tribute to Mrs. Browning, with no more reference to Mr. Browning than if he had never immortalized that very house in *The Ring and the Book*, had not written *Old Pictures in Florence*, or *The Statue and the Bust*, had not celebrated Fra Lippo and Andrea, not to mention other Italian poems, had not confessed "what he loved best in all the world." Venice remembered what name was written on his heart, however.

There is, too, *La Vita e le Opere di Roberto ed Elizabetta Barrett Browning; con Prefazione di Antonio Fogazzaro* (1907, from earlier version of 1896), by Countess Fanny Zampini-Salazar, and *Studi sulla Poesia di Roberto Browning* (1912), by Lino Pellegrini.

Browning's earliest European recognition came from M. Joseph Milsand, who gave him a prompt and cordial introduction to the French, and became his lifelong intimate friend.

In 1901 Madame Duclaux (Mary James Darmesteter) included in a volume, *Grands écrivains d'outre-manche*, a charming essay, "Ménage de poètes," based on personal recollections of Browning. She also wrote the introduction to a French translation of the poems. In 1907 Pierre Berger published a thesis on Browning, followed in 1912 by a more popular account in the *Grands écrivains étrangers* series.

The Germans have contributed theses chiefly, of which the most important are by Karl Bleiber, Adam Klug, and Karl Schmidt. There is a biography by Emil Koeppel.

Ellen Key's Swedish *Människor* (1913) is devoted mainly to the Brownings.

XIV

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MRS. BROWNING

EDITIONS

1869 Poems. 3 vols. Miller

1876 Poetical Works. 2 vols. Miller
The Household Edition.

1885 Poetical Works. 5 vols. Dodd, Mead.

1901 Complete Works. 6 vols. Sproul
The Autograph Edition, by Charlotte Porter and Helen Clarke.

1906 Poetical Works. 1 vol. Frowde
The Oxford Complete Edition.

BIOGRAPHIES AND COMMENTARIES

1881 Peter Bayne: *Two Great Englishwomen.* Clarke
Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Charlotte Brontë. Substantial information and judicious criticism.

1888 J. H. Ingram: *Elizabeth Barrett Browning.* (Famous Women) Roberts
Adequate and interesting.

1897 *Letters of Mrs. Browning.* Edited by F. G. Kenyon. Smith, Elder
Does not include the R. B. and E. B. B. correspondence nor the less important letters to Horne, already published. Particularly delightful as well as informative, for Mrs. Browning had the art of letter-writing, and reveals a rare personality.

1899 Lilian Whiting: *A Study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.* Little, Brown

Very personal. Contributes nothing new either in facts or comment.

1905 Germaine-Marie Merlette: *La Vie et l'oeuvre d'Elizabeth Barrett Browning.* Colin

Introduces an English writer to the French in a comprehensive and enthusiastic manner.

1906 Percy Lubbock: *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her Letters.* Smith, Elder

A copious but condensed compilation from all her correspondence with thread of narrative explanation.

1907 Martha Foote Crow: *Elizabeth Barrett Browning.* Eaton & Mains

In the series, "Modern Poets and Christian Teaching."

In the decade following 1905 no fewer than five German students found in the writings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning suitable material for dissertations and other studies. These monographs are by Vincent Dye, Bernhard Jacobi, Wilhelm Pöling, Edgar Fleckenstein, and Gottfried Erdenberger.

APPENDIX

I. THE SAVED REMNANT

When a poet has written over one hundred thousand lines, divided into nearly two hundred fifty poems, the majority of which are doomed to limbo, the practical procedure is to compile a *Which's Which.* As we review the long line, to which are we content to say, "Go in peace"? To which from among them do we crook a beckoning finger and assure them that not in vain have they lifted their voices against "the derisive silence of eternity"?

It might seem from the innumerable volumes of Collections and Selections that plenty of such cullings already have been made. But most of these are for school or household use, and indicate what the anthologists consider suitable for those purposes rather than the real cream of Browning. The poems by which his fame is likely to endure, and deservedly so, would be another matter. Any listing of them must be largely a record of personal preference. And in this beguiling business, even more than when trying it on Elia, we become "The Embarrassed Eliminators." Yet herewith is submitted one combination of guess and choice as to Browning's survival value. Let us ruthlessly discard the two hundred poems, including all the lengthiest but one, and retain only the fifty, some of which will be his "fifty men and women," and all containable in a trim little volume.

Certain of the following are chosen for their popular qualities, some for their intrinsic merit, others for their distinctive Browning flavor. *Through the Metidja,* for instance, the theme of which the poet doubtless gleaned from his morning paper, is at once a notable *tour de force* in prosody and an effective contrast to the just preceding *Good News,* both hinting, by the way, the author's favorite recreation. Others disclose his mirth and humor, his love of romance, his flair for character, his knack of story-telling, his faculty for carrying torches into the catacombs of history and legend.

One always wishes for elasticity in such a list. If this one were to be expanded to three score or so it would include *Pauline,* not so

green a "crab-apple" as its own producer later estimated it, and interesting on many counts. It would also find room for the rollicking *Cavalier Tunes*, the wry *Misconceptions*, the acrid *Time's Revenges*. Likewise would the door open on *Old Pictures*, *Master Hugues*, *A Grammarian's Funeral*, for their thoughts on art, music, learning, and life in general; on *By the Fireside* for its personal pictures; on *The Return of the Druses* as the best-made play of an unstageable playwright; and on *Balaustion's Adventure* for its depth, dignity, and classic grace. And when the door closes we glance as wistfully at some of the still excluded as they do at us.

It is entirely natural that the present generation should not only read more readily the productions of its own contemporaries but should assume the inherent superiority of the new and up-to-date. To be supercilious or perhaps indulgently condescending toward all antiquated relics in general and the artless Victorians in particular is its high prerogative. But it will not be so long until the poems of our Carl Sandburgs and Edna St. Vincent Millays will be in their turn begging for rescue from oblivion. And if one hundred years hence the choicest of them can steal a few moments from readers still interested in that quaint, funny old twentieth century, and can compete with novelties of that day, then indeed they can greet "Earth's Immortalities" as fellow-pilgrims in eternity. Perchance they will encounter a well-preserved, adventuring Rabbi who will say kindly to them, "Grow old along with me."

The order of the list follows that of the standard editions.

Pippa Passes
How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr
The Flower's Name
Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis
Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister
The Laboratory
The Lost Mistress
Earth's Immortalities
Meeting at Night
Song
Love among the Ruins
A Lovers' Quarrel
Up at a Villa—Down in the City
A Toccata of Galuppi's
"De Gustibus—"
Home Thoughts, from Abroad
Saul
My Star
Two in the Campagna
In Three Days
My Last Duchess
In a Gondola
The Last Ride Together
The Statue and the Bust
Porphyria's Lover

"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"
How It Strikes a Contemporary
An Epistle
Johannes Agricola in Meditation
Fra Lippo Lippi
Andrea del Sarto
The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church
Bishop Blougram's Apology
Cleon
One Word More
In a Balcony
Abt Vogler
Caliban upon Setebos
Confessions
Prospice
Youth and Art
The Ring and the Book
Prelude and Epilogue to "The Two Poets of Croisic"
Muléykeh
Apollo and the Fates
Speculative
"Imperante Augusto Natus Est—"
Rephan

II. PERSONALIA

In spite of his conspicuous talent for the dramatic mode of expression and of his avowed inability to speak openly of and for himself, Browning's poetry does not lack its autobiographical strain. With the idea that it is all the more interesting for its supposed and claimed rare appearance, this personal utterance is presented by itself in the titles which follow. It includes tributes to his friends and to other poets as well as the more intimate opening of his own heart.

Pauline
Waring
The Englishman in Italy
Home Thoughts
May and Death
Christmas Eve
Easter Day
By the Fireside
Memorabilia
Popularity
"De Gustibus—"
One Word More
Prospice
Prologue and Epilogue to "Pacchiarotto"
House
Pisgah-Sights
Fears and Scruples
La Saisiaz
Epilogue to "The Two Poets of Croisic"
Dubiety
Speculative
Development
Reverie
Prologue and Epilogue to "Asolando"

Though not a separate poem, the invocation to "Lyric Love" which concludes the first book of *The Ring and the Book*, belongs in this list.

III. BEST ESSAYS ON BROWNING

Nobody wants to read all that has been written about a provocative poet who has drawn fire from far and near, wise and foolish, straight shots and wild. But if anyone should ask for a short list culled from the briefer comments, I should submit the following as those which, in my judgment, would best repay hunting up and reading. The selection is made with a view to comprehensiveness and variety, and as indicating the general trend of Browning commentary through four decades.

It is for this last reason that the essays are listed chronologically, an arrangement which also avoids the problem of choosing any other basis for rank and precedence. Bibliographical details will be found in the list headed Separate Essays from Various Sources, pages 140–142 above.

There is an amusing propriety in the theme of the first, and the only one dating back to the 'eighties. The notorious Browning obscurity is what people were having a fit over at that time, and Mr. Birrell's wry remarks were calculated to calm their nerves. Any such collection must include some notice of the poet's titanic masterpiece, and to have one as condensed and adequate as Viscount Morley's is a piece of good fortune. Professor Brinton discusses an important ethical and artistic topic from the scientific viewpoint of an ethnologist, and Professor Scudder deals in a delightful manner with another vital element in a man's life and art. For a bit of humor in Browning's name, though not at his expense, Mr. Crook's little burlesque on the solemn Bacon-Shakespeare disputation is piquant and gay.

The genially pungent tone of Mr. Stephen's analysis of Browning's rather oracular rationalizing made it popular enough in its own day to be published in three journals. Indeed, about the turn of the century there was quite an outburst of Browning interest. Professor Trent's article was occasioned by the appearance of a pair of new biographies, and in contrasting them he speaks wisely of the whole business of criticism. No author has "arrived" with the critics, however, until his heroines have been accorded special recognition and treatment, and this has been done for Browning by Miss Mayne. She scrutinizes the simple little English lass and the sagacious young

Greek matron with an originality and a discernment that make her studies distinctive. But while all dramatic authors have heroines, no other has such a corner on the monologue, and no treatment of this Browning specialty is better than Professor Palmer's. Mr. Shanks is particularly concerned with the poet's gift for monologue, but regards it from the ultra-modern angle, a sign that even the innocent Browning cannot escape the new searchlight so energetically sweeping backward along the literary horizon.

Mr. Littell and Mr. Scott are likewise up to the minute, both in the breezy journalistic style begging indulgence for the Victorian poet who was not to blame for his incense burners. One proves that his optimism is not so pink as it has been painted, the other assures us that his philosophic profundity is not so deep as it sounds. The Reverend Kelman's lectures hark back somewhat to the older tradition, but they throw light on the influences that helped mold a poet who himself harked back more than he looked forward.

These essayists as a group show more diversity than unity, though they do no quarreling among themselves. English and American, men and women, scholars, statesmen, scientists, journalists, they may not represent Browning's best baker's dozen critics (indeed, the majority of them are not in the fold at all), but they write with the free-lancer's spontaneity; those who are not so meaty are at least spicy, they favor salt over sugar as seasoning, and they are equally free from peevish complaining and fulsome praise.

The animating spirit of this heterogeneous assemblage is one of essential respect and cordial affection for their subject. They write as who would say, if put to the question, yes, this Robert Browning could be commended even to this frantically occupied generation. What with his irresistible appeal to the heart and his zestful stimulus to the imagination, he is worth talking and writing about and even reading about, and that by those so beset and importuned that they cannot afford to spend time on anything or anybody without knowing why.

The gist of this symposium is to adduce a reasonable amount of the why. If space permitted I should reprint the essays here. But until such time as the anthology can be assembled, the following list may serve as a convenient Reader's Guide:

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